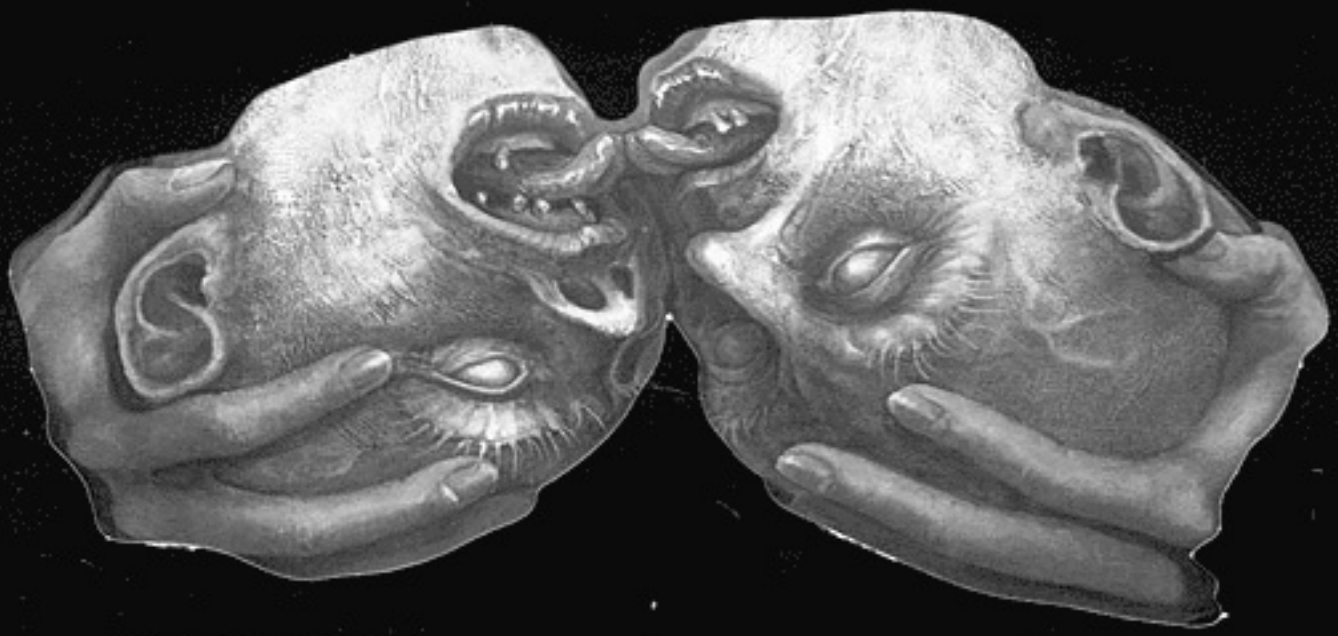
VISIT…

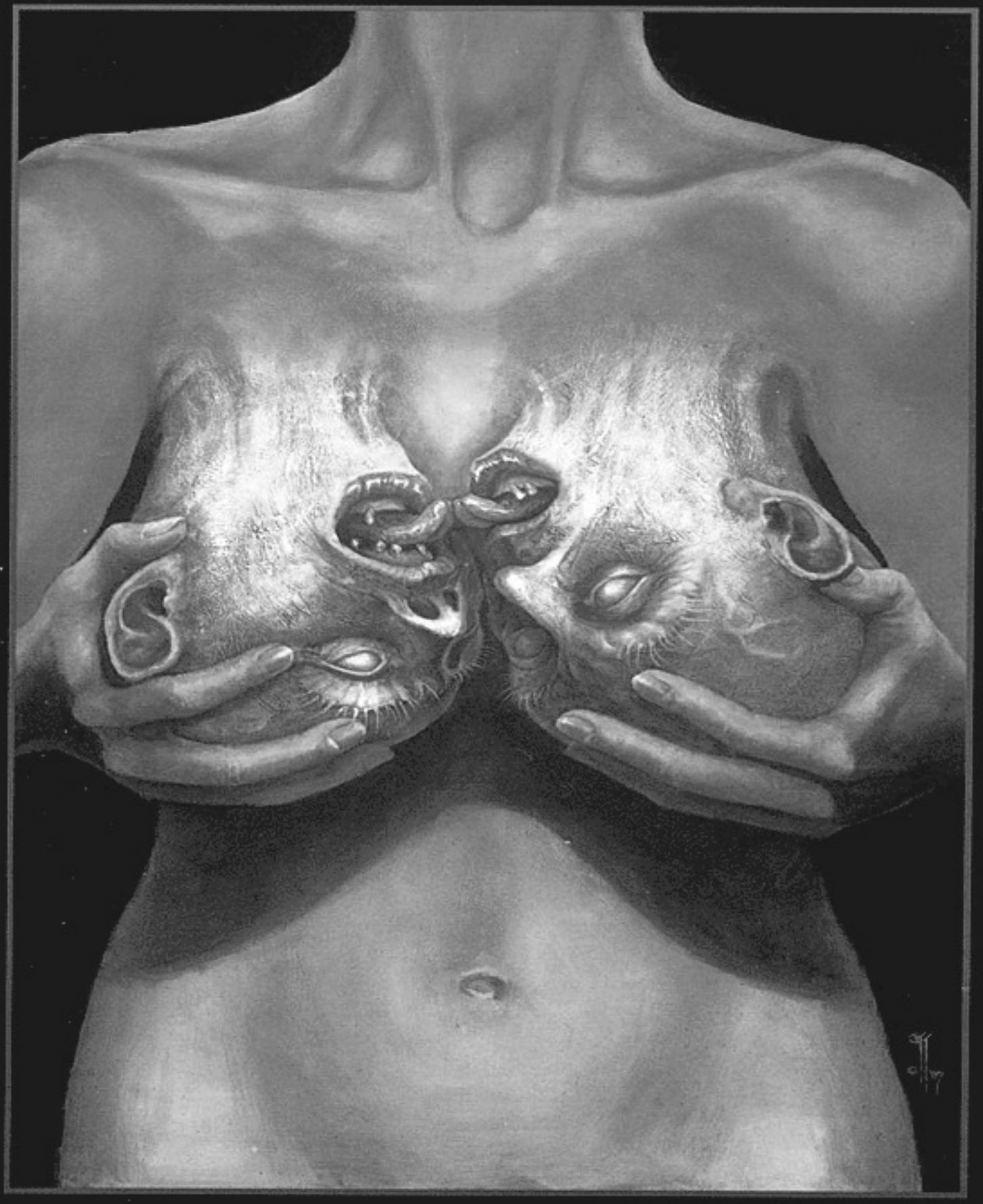
"HE IS A MAPMAKER OF THE MIND, CHARTING THE FARTHEST REACHES OF THE IMAGINATION."—*THE WASHINGTON TIMES*

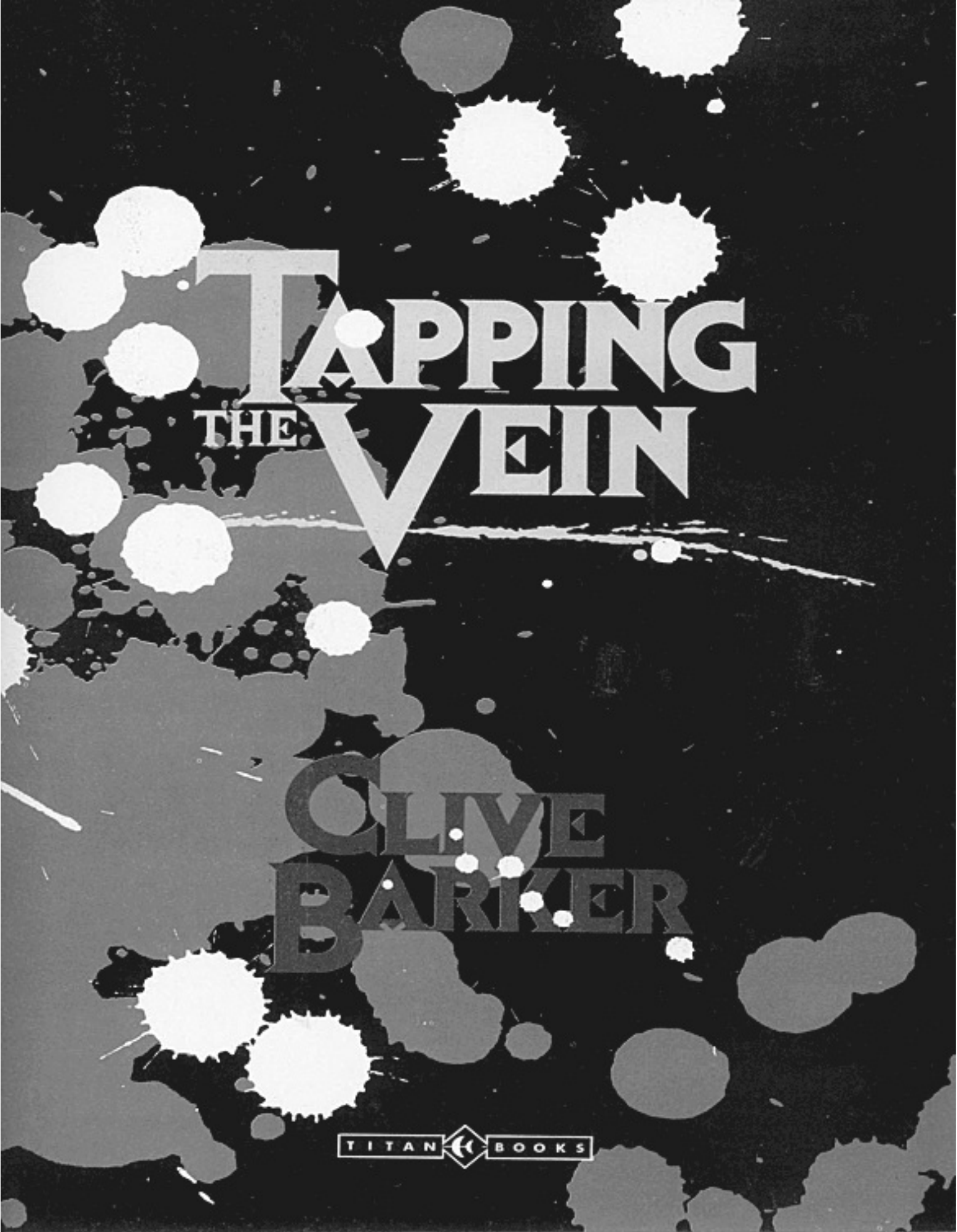
CLIVE BARKER



TAPPING THE VEIN

BOOK FOUR




TAPPING
THE VEIN
CLIVE
BARKER
TITAN BOOKS

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Hell's Event

Illustrated by Steven E. Johnson, Alan Okamoto, and Jim Pearson
Adapted by Fred Burke
Lettered by Bill Pearson

The Madonna

Pencilled by Stan Woch
Inked by Mark Farmer
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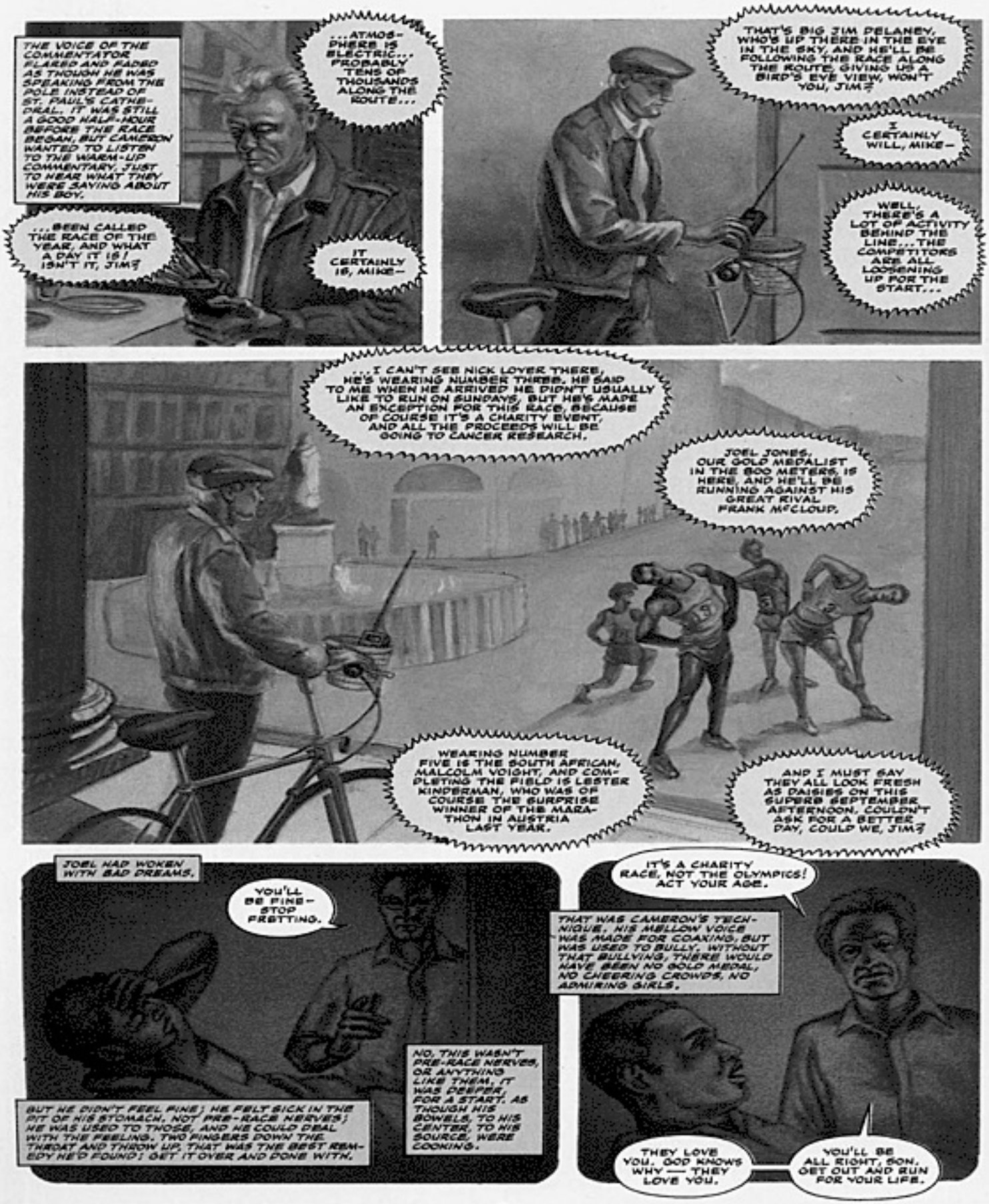
Adapted by Fred Burke
Lettered by Bill Pearson

HELL CAME UP TO THE STREETS AND SQUARES OF LONDON THAT SEPTEMBER, ICY FROM THE DEPTHS OF THE NINTH CIRCLE, TOO FROZEN TO BE WARMED EVEN BY THE SWELTER OF AN INDIAN SUMMER. IT HAD LAID ITS PLANS AS CAREFULLY AS EVER, PLANS BEING WHAT THEY WERE, AND FRAGILE.
THIS TIME IT WAS PERHAPS A LITTLE MORE FINICKY THAN USUAL, CHECKING EVERY LAST DETAIL TWICE OR THREE TIMES, TO BE CERTAIN IT HAD EVERY CHANCE OF WINNING THIS VITAL GAME.
IT HAD NEVER LACKED COMPETITIVE SPIRIT; IT HAD MATCHED FIRE AGAINST FLESH A THOUSAND THOUSAND TIMES DOWN THE CENTURIES, SOMETIMES WINNING, MORE OFTEN LOSING. WAGERS WERE, AFTER ALL, THE STUFF OF ITS ADVANCEMENT. WITHOUT THE HUMAN URGE TO COMPETE, TO BARGAIN, AND TO BET, PANDEMONIUM MIGHT WELL HAVE FALLEN FOR WANT OF CITIZENS.
DANCING, DOG RACING, FIDDLE-PLAYING: IT WAS ALL ONE TO THE GULFS, ALL A GAME IN WHICH IT MIGHT, IF IT PLAYED WITH SUFFICIENT WIT, GARNER A SOUL OR TWO. THAT WAS WHY HELL CAME UP TO LONDON THAT BRIGHT BLUE DAY: TO RUN A RACE, AND TO WIN, IF IT COULD, ENOUGH SOULS TO KEEP IT BUSY WITH PERDITION ANOTHER AGE.
HELL'S EVENT
BO JOELL


THE VOICE OF THE COMMENTATOR FLARED AND FADED AS THOUGH HE WAS SPEAKING FROM THE POLE INSTEAD OF ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL. IT WAS STILL A GOOD HALF-HOUR BEFORE THE RACE BEGAN, BUT CAMERON WANTED TO LISTEN TO THE WARM-UP COMMENTARY, JUST TO HEAR WHAT THEY WERE SAYING ABOUT HIS BOY.
...ATMOSPHERE IS ELECTRIC... PROBABLY TENS OF THOUSANDS ALONG THE ROUTE...
...BEEN CALLED THE RACE OF THE YEAR, AND WHAT A DAY IT IS! ISN'T IT, JIM?
IT CERTAINLY IS, MIKE—
THAT'S BIG JIM DELANEY, WHO'S UP THERE IN THE EYE IN THE SKY, AND HE'LL BE FOLLOWING THE RACE ALONG THE ROUTE, GIVING US A BIRD'S EYE VIEW, WON'T YOU, JIM?
I CERTAINLY WILL, MIKE—
WELL, THERE'S A LOT OF ACTIVITY BEHIND THE LINE... THE COMPETITORS ARE ALL LOOSENING UP FOR THE START...
...I CAN'T SEE NICK LOVER THERE, HE'S WEARING NUMBER THREE. HE SAID TO ME WHEN HE ARRIVED HE DIDN'T USUALLY LIKE TO RUN ON SUNDAYS, BUT HE'S MADE AN EXCEPTION FOR THIS RACE, BECAUSE OF COURSE IT'S A CHARITY EVENT, AND ALL THE PROCEEDS WILL BE GOING TO CANCER RESEARCH.
JOEL JONES, OUR GOLD MEDALIST IN THE 800 METERS, IS HERE, AND HE'LL BE RUNNING AGAINST HIS GREAT RIVAL FRANK McCLOUD.
WEARING NUMBER FIVE IS THE SOUTH AFRICAN, MALCOLM VOIGHT, AND COMPLETING THE FIELD IS LESTER KINDERMAN, WHO WAS OF COURSE THE SURPRISE WINNER OF THE MARATHON IN AUSTRIA LAST YEAR.
AND I MUST SAY THEY ALL LOOK FRESH AS DAISIES ON THIS SUPERB SEPTEMBER AFTERNOON. COULDN'T ASK FOR A BETTER DAY, COULD WE, JIM?
JOEL HAD WOKEN WITH BAD DREAMS.
YOU'LL BE FINE— STOP FRETTING.
BUT HE DIDN'T FEEL FINE; HE FELT SICK IN THE PIT OF HIS STOMACH, NOT PRE-RACE NERVES; HE WAS USED TO THOSE, AND HE COULD DEAL WITH THE FEELING. TWO FINGERS DOWN THE THROAT AND THROW UP, THAT WAS THE BEST REMEDY HE'D FOUND; GET IT OVER AND DONE WITH.
NO, THIS WASN'T PRE-RACE NERVES, OR ANYTHING LIKE THEM, IT WAS DEEPER, FOR A START. AS THOUGH HIS BOWELS, TO HIS CENTER, TO HIS SOURCE, WERE COOKING.
IT'S A CHARITY RACE, NOT THE OLYMPICS! ACT YOUR AGE.
THAT WAS CAMERON'S TECHNIQUE, HIS MELLOW VOICE WAS MADE FOR COAXING, BUT WAS USED TO BULLY. WITHOUT THAT BULLYING, THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN NO GOLD MEDAL, NO CHEERING CROWDS, NO ADMIRING GIRLS.
THEY LOVE YOU. GOD KNOWS WHY — THEY LOVE YOU.
YOU'LL BE ALL RIGHT, SON. GET OUT AND RUN FOR YOUR LIFE.

NOW, IN THE BROAD DAYLIGHT, JOEL LOOKED AT THE REST OF THE FIELD AND FELT A LITTLE MORE BUOYANT.

KINDERMAN HAD STAMINA, BUT NO FINISHING POWER OVER MIDDLE DISTANCE. MARATHON TECHNIQUE WAS A DIFFERENT SKILL ALTOGETHER.

LOVER WAS GOOD, BUT THIS WASN'T REALLY HIS DISTANCE EITHER.

HE WAS A HURDLER, AND A SOMETIMES SPRINTER. 400 METERS WAS HIS LIMIT AND EVEN THEN HE WASN'T HAPPY.

VOIGHT, THE SOUTH AFRICAN— WELL, THERE WASN'T MUCH INFORMATION ON HIM, OBVIOUSLY SOMEONE TO WATCH OUT FOR, JUST IN CASE HE SPRUNG A SURPRISE.

BUT THE REAL PROBLEM OF THE RACE WAS McCLOUD. JOEL HAD RUN AGAINST FRANK "FLASH" McCLOUD THREE TIMES. TWICE BEATEN HIM INTO SECOND PLACE, ONCE (PAINFULLY) HAD THE POSITIONS REVERSED. FRANKIE BOY HAD A FEW SCORES TO SETTLE, ESPECIALLY THE OLYMPICS DEFEAT. HE HADN'T LIKED TAKING THE SILVER. FRANK WAS THE MAN TO WATCH, NO DOUBT OF IT.

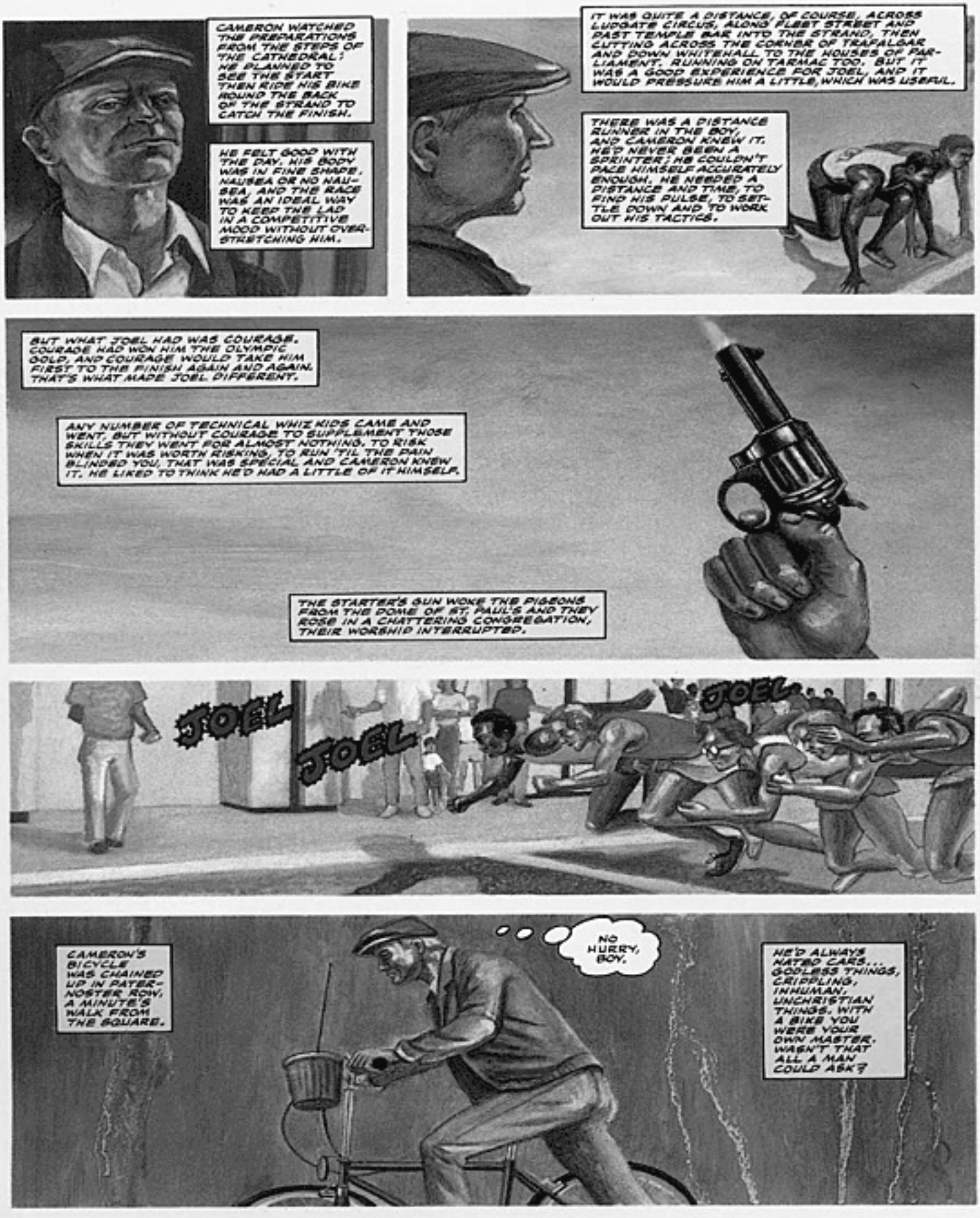
FOR A MOMENT, JOEL CAUGHT VOIGHT STARING AT HIM. UNUSUAL, THAT. COMPETITORS SELDOM EVEN GLANCED AT EACH OTHER BEFORE A RACE— IT WAS A KIND OF COYNESS.

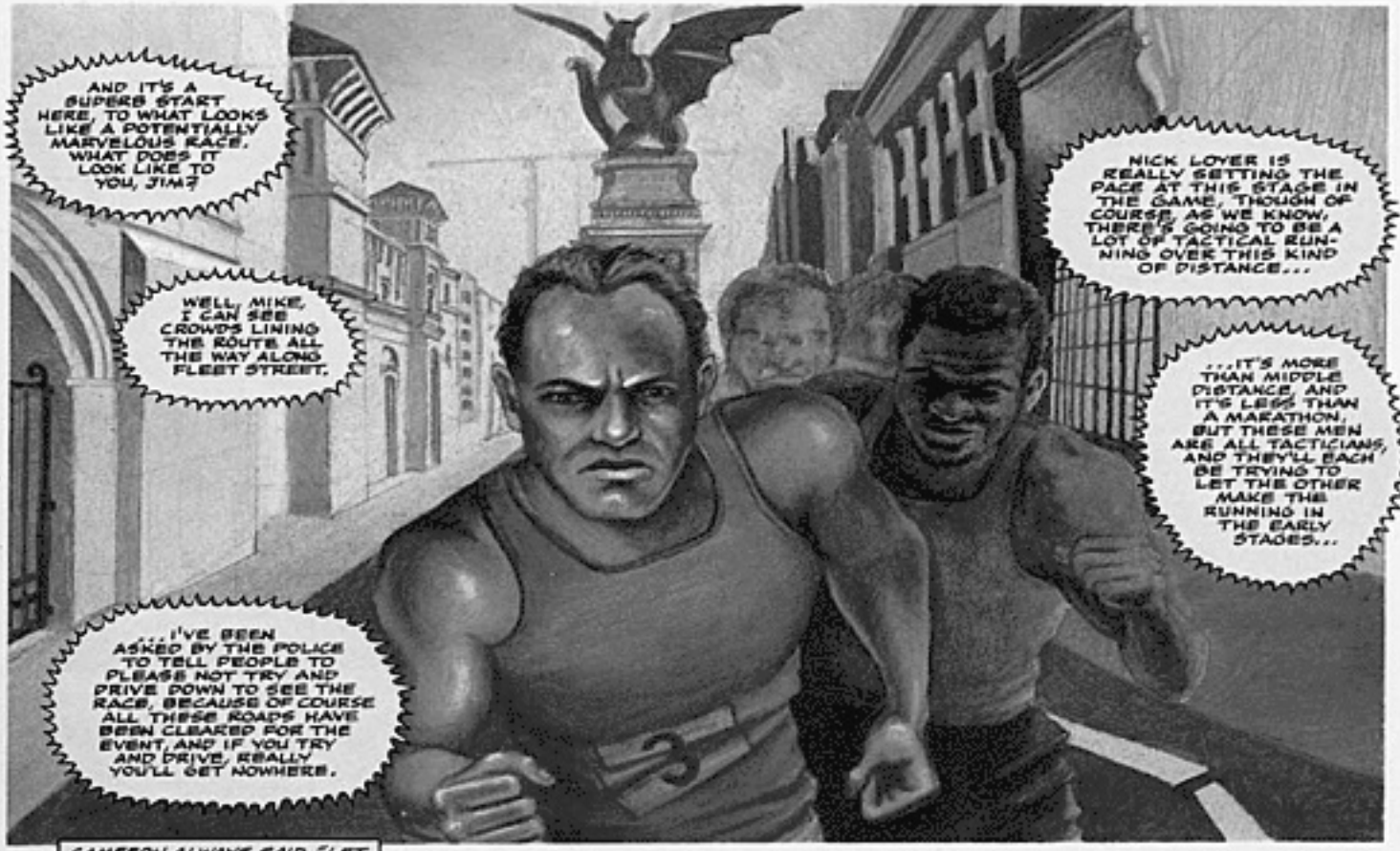
WHEN THEIR EYES MET, VOIGHT LOOKED AWAY. THE CRUCIFIX HE WAS WEARING GLINTING GOLD AS IT SWUNG GENTLY BENEATH HIS CHIN.

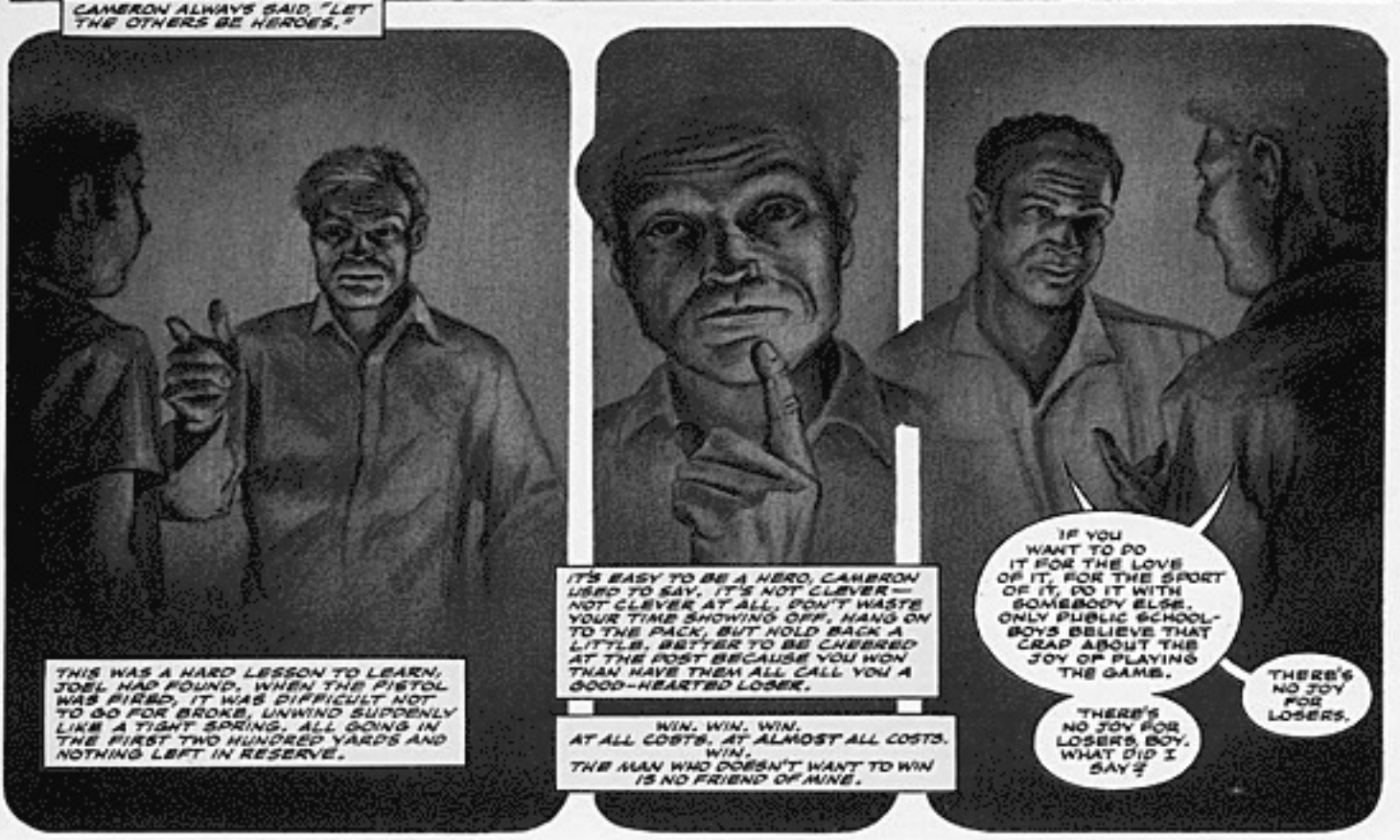
JOEL HAD A GOOD LUCK CHARM WITH HIM, TOO.

TUCKED INTO THE WAISTBAND OF HIS SHORTS, A LOCK OF HIS MOTHER'S HAIR, WHICH SHE HAD PLAITED FOR HIM HALF A DECADE AGO, BEFORE HIS FIRST MAJOR RACE.

SHE HAD RETURNED TO BARBADOS THE FOLLOWING YEAR, AND DIED THERE. A GREAT GRIEF. AN UNFORGETTABLE LOSS. WITHOUT CAMERON, HE WOULD HAVE CRUMBLED.


CAMERON WATCHED THE PREPARATIONS FROM THE STEPS OF THE CATHEDRAL: HE PLANNED TO SEE THE START THEN RIDE HIS BIKE ROUND THE BACK OF THE STRAND TO CATCH THE FINISH.
HE FELT GOOD WITH THE DAY. HIS BODY WAS IN FINE SHAPE, NAUSEA OR NO NAUSEA, AND THE RACE WAS AN IDEAL WAY TO KEEP THE LAD IN A COMPETITIVE MOOD WITHOUT OVERSTRETCHING HIM.
IT WAS QUITE A DISTANCE, OF COURSE, ACROSS LUDGATE CIRCUS, ALONG FLEET STREET AND PAST TEMPLE BAR INTO THE STRAND, THEN CUTTING ACROSS THE CORNER OF TRAFALGAR AND DOWN WHITEHALL TO THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT. RUNNING ON TARMAC TOO. BUT IT WAS A GOOD EXPERIENCE FOR JOEL, AND IT WOULD PRESSURE HIM A LITTLE, WHICH WAS USEFUL.
THERE WAS A DISTANCE RUNNER IN THE BOY, AND CAMERON KNEW IT. HE'D NEVER BEEN A SPRINTER; HE COULDN'T PACE HIMSELF ACCURATELY ENOUGH. HE NEEDED A DISTANCE AND TIME, TO FIND HIS PULSE, TO SETTLE DOWN AND TO WORK OUT HIS TACTICS.
BUT WHAT JOEL HAD WAS COURAGE. COURAGE HAD WON HIM THE OLYMPIC GOLD, AND COURAGE WOULD TAKE HIM FIRST TO THE FINISH AGAIN AND AGAIN. THAT'S WHAT MADE JOEL DIFFERENT.
ANY NUMBER OF TECHNICAL WHIZ KIDS CAME AND WENT, BUT WITHOUT COURAGE TO SUPPLEMENT THOSE SKILLS THEY WENT FOR ALMOST NOTHING. TO RISK WHEN IT WAS WORTH RISKING, TO RUN 'TIL THE PAIN BLINDED YOU, THAT WAS SPECIAL AND CAMERON KNEW IT. HE LIKED TO THINK HE'D HAD A LITTLE OF IT HIMSELF.
THE STARTER'S GUN WOKE THE PIGEONS FROM THE DOME OF ST. PAUL'S AND THEY ROSE IN A CHATTERING CONGREGATION, THEIR WORSHIP INTERRUPTED.
JOEL
JOEL
JOEL
CAMERON'S BICYCLE WAS CHAINED UP IN PATERNOSTER ROW, A MINUTE'S WALK FROM THE SQUARE.
NO HURRY, BOY.
HE'D ALWAYS HATED CARS... GODLESS THINGS, CRIPPLING, INHUMAN, UNCHRISTIAN THINGS. WITH A BIKE YOU WERE YOUR OWN MASTER. WASN'T THAT ALL A MAN COULD ASK?

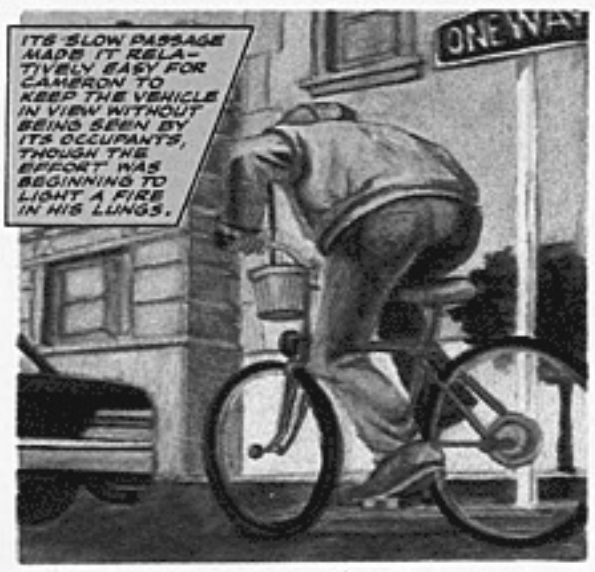

AND IT'S A SUPERB START HERE, TO WHAT LOOKS LIKE A POTENTIALLY MARVELOUS RACE. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO YOU, JIM?
WELL, MIKE, I CAN SEE CROWDS LINING THE ROUTE ALL THE WAY ALONG FLEET STREET.
...I'VE BEEN ASKED BY THE POLICE TO TELL PEOPLE TO PLEASE NOT TRY AND DRIVE DOWN TO SEE THE RACE, BECAUSE OF COURSE ALL THESE ROADS HAVE BEEN CLEARED FOR THE EVENT, AND IF YOU TRY AND DRIVE, REALLY YOU'LL GET NOWHERE.
NICK LOVER IS REALLY SETTING THE PACE AT THIS STAGE IN THE GAME, THOUGH OF COURSE, AS WE KNOW, THERE'S GOING TO BE A LOT OF TACTICAL RUNNING OVER THIS KIND OF DISTANCE...
...IT'S MORE THAN MIDDLE DISTANCE, AND IT'S LESS THAN A MARATHON, BUT THESE MEN ARE ALL TACTICIANS, AND THEY'LL EACH BE TRYING TO LET THE OTHER MAKE THE RUNNING IN THE EARLY STAGES...

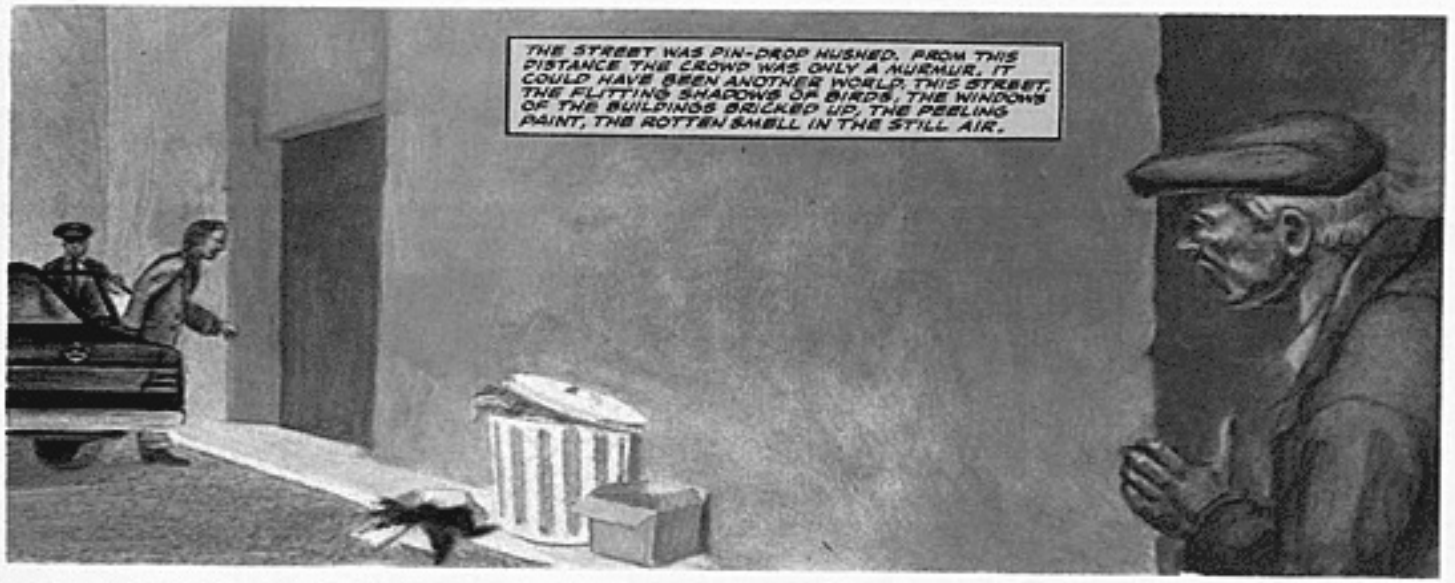

CAMERON ALWAYS SAID, "LET THE OTHERS BE HEROES."
THIS WAS A HARD LESSON TO LEARN, JOEL HAD FOUND. WHEN THE PISTOL WAS FIRED, IT WAS DIFFICULT NOT TO GO FOR BROKE. UNWIND SUDDENLY LIKE A TIGHT SPRING. ALL GOING IN THE FIRST TWO HUNDRED YARDS AND NOTHING LEFT IN RESERVE.
IT'S EASY TO BE A HERO, CAMERON USED TO SAY. IT'S NOT CLEVER — NOT CLEVER AT ALL. DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME SHOWING OFF. HANG ON TO THE PACK, BUT HOLD BACK A LITTLE. BETTER TO BE CHEERED AT THE POST BECAUSE YOU WON THAN HAVE THEM ALL CALL YOU A GOOD-HEARTED LOSER.
WIN. WIN. WIN. AT ALL COSTS. AT ALMOST ALL COSTS. WIN. THE MAN WHO DOESN'T WANT TO WIN IS NO FRIEND OF MINE.
IF YOU WANT TO DO IT FOR THE LOVE OF IT, FOR THE SPORT OF IT, DO IT WITH SOMEBODY ELSE. ONLY PUBLIC SCHOOLBOYS BELIEVE THAT CRAP ABOUT THE JOY OF PLAYING THE GAME.
THERE'S NO JOY FOR LOSERS.
"THERE'S NO JOY FOR LOSERS, BOY. WHAT DID I SAY?

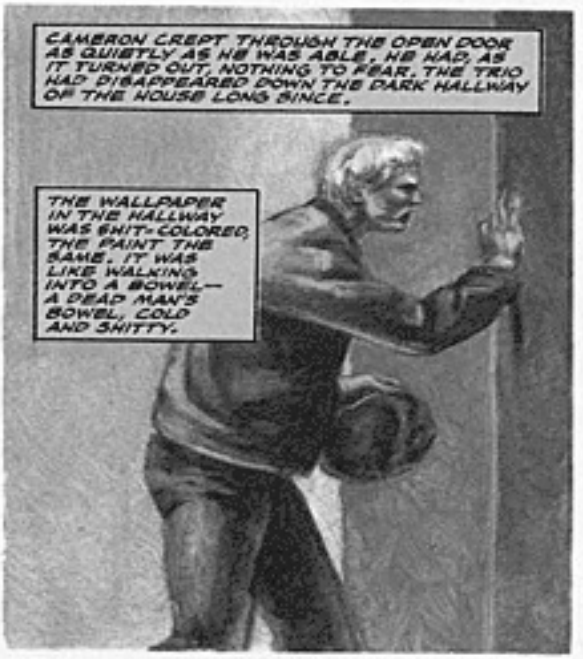
IN PATERNOSTER ROW THE CHEERING WAS MUTED, AND THE SHADOWS OF THE BUILDINGS BLOCKED THE SUN. IT WAS ALMOST COLD.
THE PIGEONS STILL PASSED OVER, UNABLE TO SETTLE NOW THEY'D BEEN ROUSED FROM THEIR ROOST. THEY WERE THE ONLY OCCUPANTS OF THE BACK STREETS. THE REST OF THE LIVING WORLD, IT SEEMED, WAS WATCHING THIS RACE.
— AND NICK LOVER IS FALLING BEHIND ALREADY—

THAT WAS QUICK. MIND YOU, LOVER WAS PAST HIS PRIME BY TWO OR THREE YEARS. TIME TO THROW IN THE SPIKE AND LET THE YOUNGER MEN TAKE OVER.
HE'D HAD TO DO IT, THOUGH MY GOD IT HAD BEEN PAINFUL. CAMERON REMEMBERED ACUTELY HOW HE'D FELT AT THIRTY-THREE, WHEN HE REALIZED THAT HIS BEST RUNNING YEARS WERE OVER.
IT WAS LIKE HAVING ONE FOOT BURIED IN THE GRAVE, A SALUTARY REMINDER OF HOW QUICKLY THE BODY BLOOMS AND BEGINS TO WITHER.

CAMERON DIDN'T LIKE THE LOOKS OF THIS AT ALL. HE'D SEEN THE SOUTH AFRICAN FIVE MINUTES EARLIER, OFF AND RUNNING. SO WHO WAS THIS? A DOUBLE, OBVIOUSLY. IT SMELT OF A FIX SOMEHOW; IT STANK TO HIGH HEAVEN.
THE MERCEDES WAS THREADING ITS WAY THROUGH THE NARROW STREETS WITH SOME DIFFICULTY, IGNORING ALL THE ONE WAY SIGNS AS IT WENT.


ITS SLOW PASSAGE MADE IT RELATIVELY EASY FOR CAMERON TO KEEP THE VEHICLE IN VIEW WITHOUT BEING SEEN BY ITS OCCUPANTS, THOUGH THE EFFORT WAS BEGINNING TO LIGHT A FIRE IN HIS LUNGS.
ONE WAY

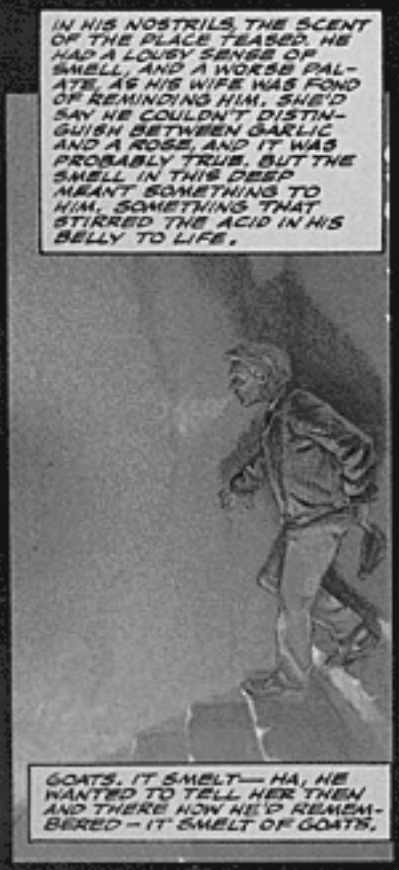

THE STREET WAS PIN-DROP HUSHED. FROM THIS DISTANCE THE CROWD WAS ONLY A MURMUR. IT COULD HAVE BEEN ANOTHER WORLD. THIS STREET, THE FLITTING SHADOWS OF BIRDS, THE WINDOWS OF THE BUILDINGS BRICKED UP, THE PEELING PAINT, THE ROTTEN SMELL IN THE STILL AIR.


CAMERON CREPT THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR AS QUIETLY AS HE WAS ABLE. HE HAD, AS IT TURNED OUT, NOTHING TO FEAR. THE TRIO HAD DISAPPEARED DOWN THE DARK HALLWAY OF THE HOUSE LONG SINCE.
THE WALLPAPER IN THE HALLWAY WAS SHIT-COLORED; THE PAINT THE SAME. IT WAS LIKE WALKING INTO A BOWEL— A DEAD MAN'S BOWEL, COLD AND SHITTY.

CAMERON COULD HEAR THEIR VOICES FROM BELOW. NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT, HE THOUGHT.

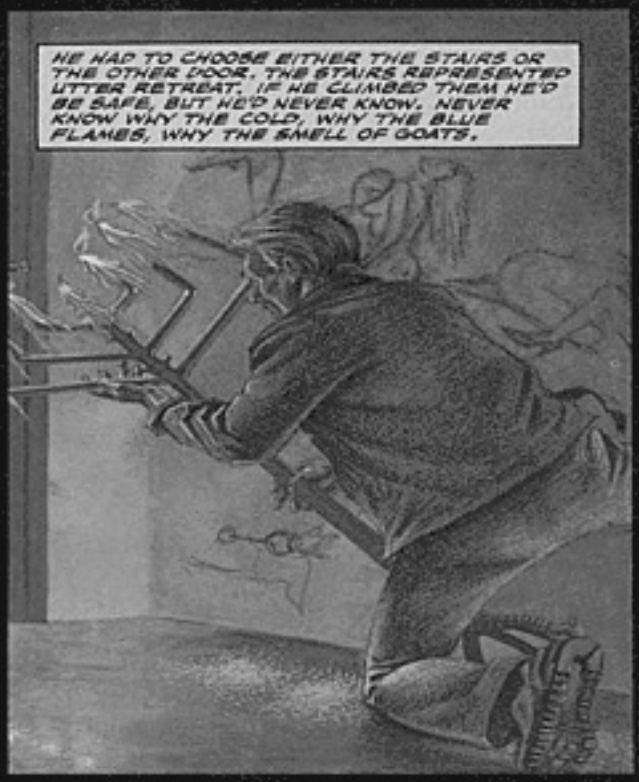
THE DARKNESS BEYOND THE DOOR WAS ICY. NOT JUST COLD, NOT DAMP, BUT REFRIGERATED. FOR A MOMENT, HE THOUGHT HE'D STEPPED INTO A COLD STORAGE ROOM.

THE OPEN DOOR AT HIS BACK WAS EXTREMELY TEMPTING, BUT HE WAS CURIOUS, SO CURIOUS.
THERE WAS NOTHING TO DO BUT DESCEND.


IN HIS NOSTRILS, THE SCENT OF THE PLACE TEASED. HE HAD A LOUSY SENSE OF SMELL, AND A WORSE PALATE, AS HIS WIFE WAS FOND OF REMINDING HIM. SHE'D SAY HE COULDN'T DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GARLIC AND A ROSE, AND IT WAS PROBABLY TRUE. BUT THE SMELL IN THIS DEEP MEANT SOMETHING TO HIM, SOMETHING THAT STIRRED THE ACID IN HIS BELLY TO LIFE.
GOATS. IT SMELT— HA, HE WANTED TO TELL HER THEN AND THERE HOW HE'D REMEMBERED — IT SMELT OF GOATS.

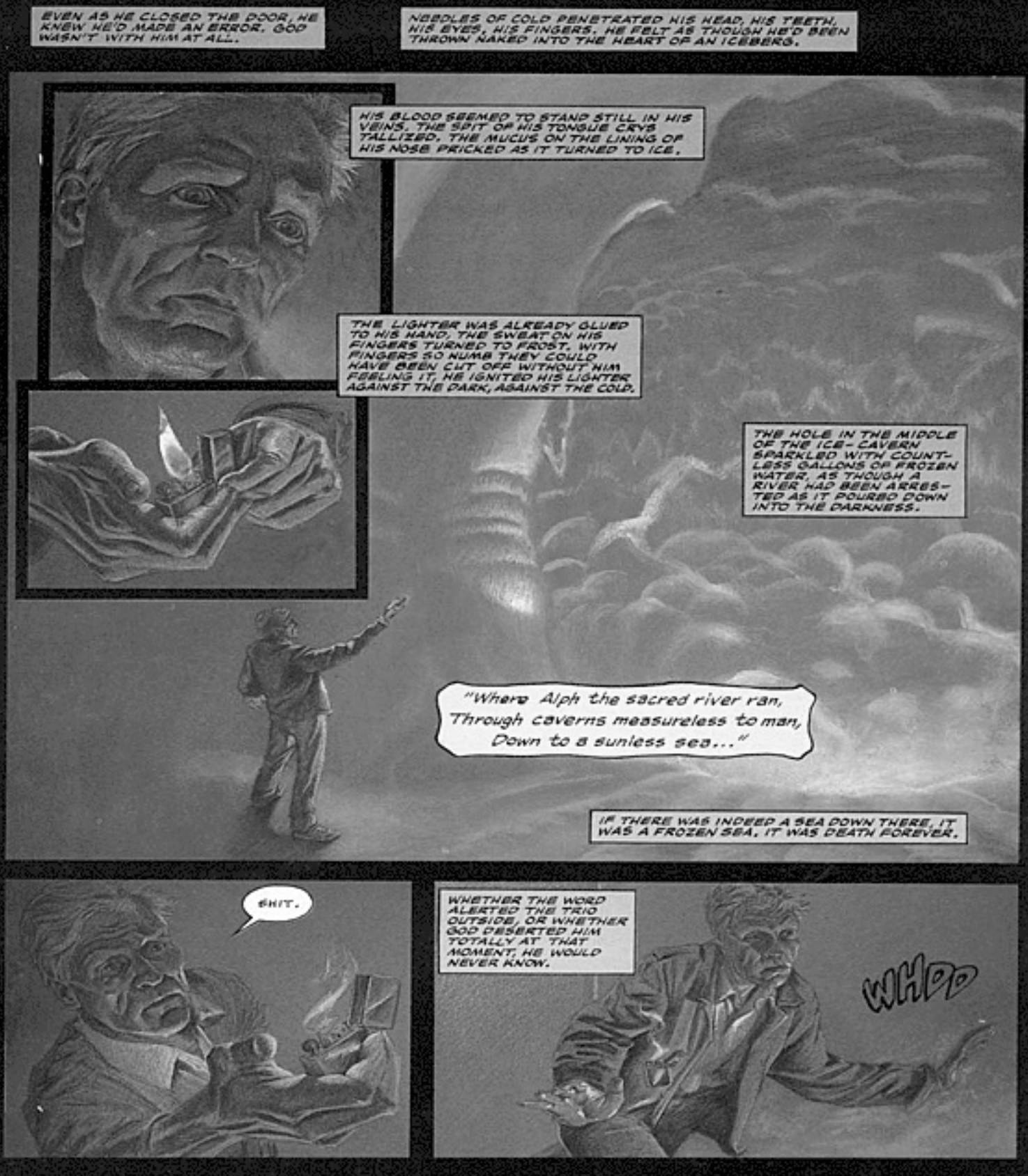
THE GOATY SMELL WAS STRONGER NOW, AND MINGLED WITH A SCENT SO SICKLY SWEET IT BELONGED IN A TURKISH BROTHEL.
TWO DOORS LED OFF THE CHAMBER, AND FROM BEHIND ONE CAMERON HEARD THE CONVERSATION CONTINUING.

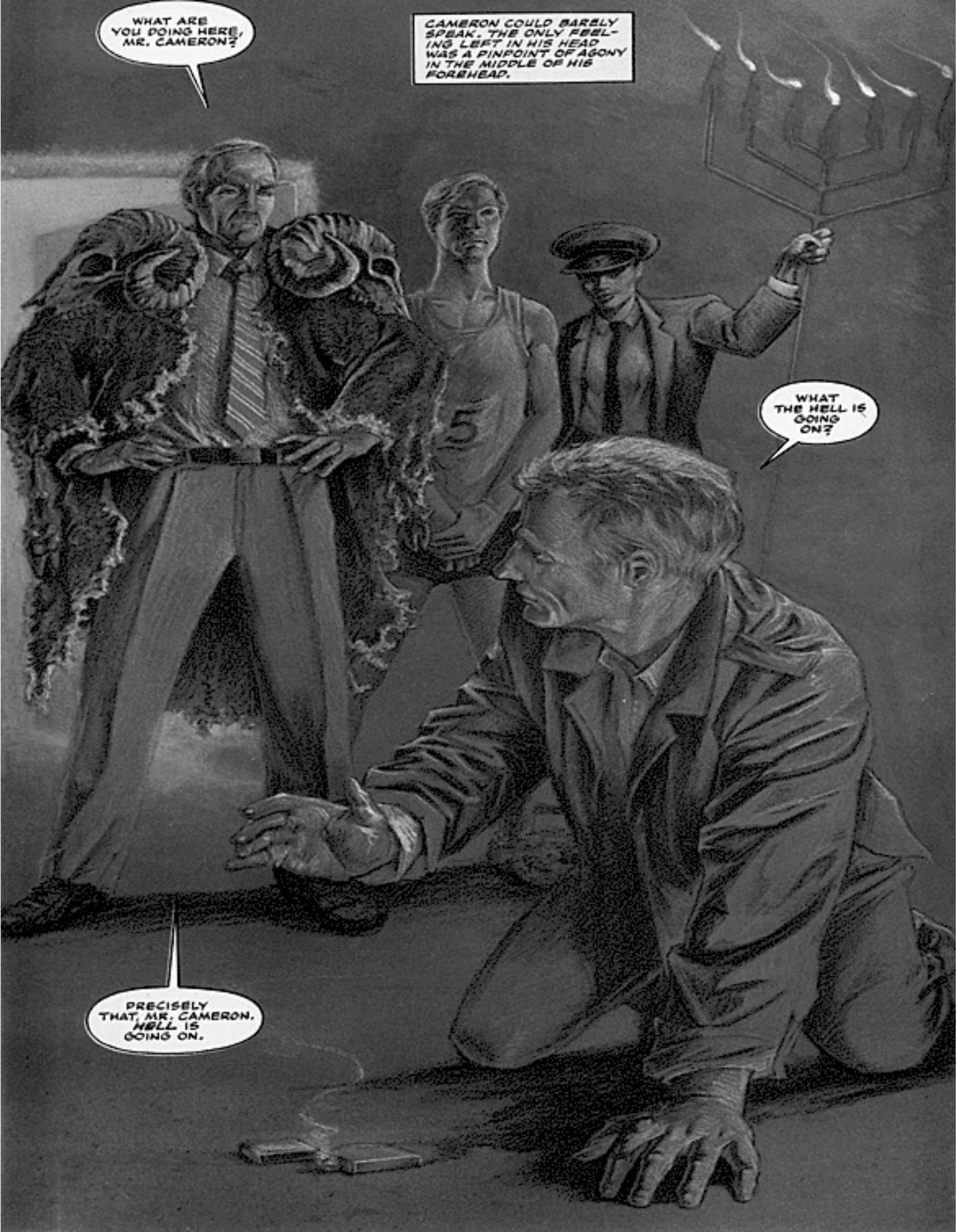
— HURRY — — THE RIGHT SKILLS — CHILDREN, CHILDREN —
HA HAH HA
I BELIEVE WE — TOMORROW — ALL OF US —
SUDDENLY THE VOICES SEEMED TO CHANGE DIRECTION, AS IF THE SPEAKERS WERE MOVING BACK TOWARDS THE DOOR.

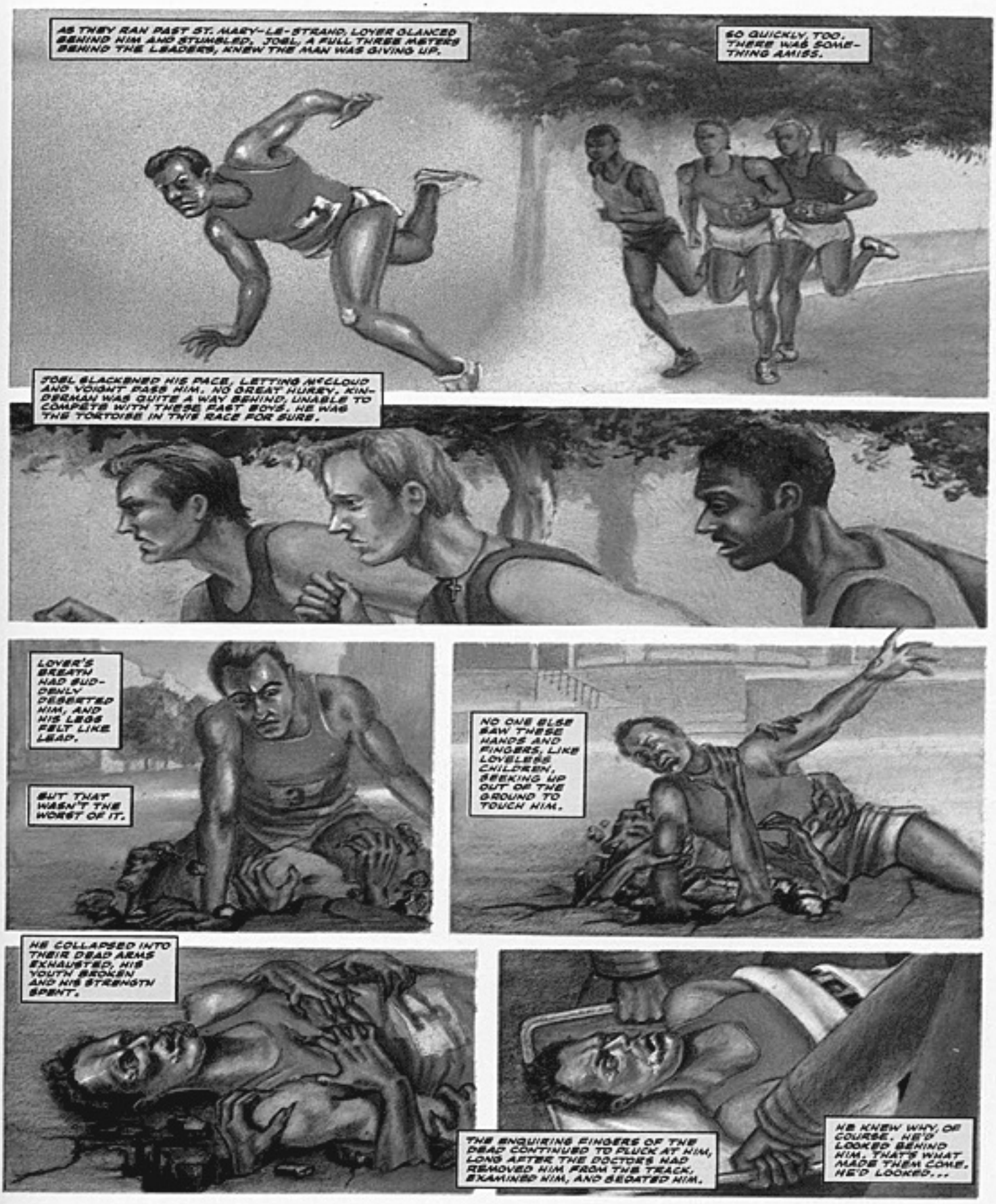

HE HAD TO CHOOSE EITHER THE STAIRS OR THE OTHER DOOR. THE STAIRS REPRESENTED UTTER RETREAT. IF HE CLIMBED THEM HE'D BE SAFE, BUT HE'D NEVER KNOW. NEVER KNOW WHY THE COLD, WHY THE BLUE FLAMES, WHY THE SMELL OF GOATS.

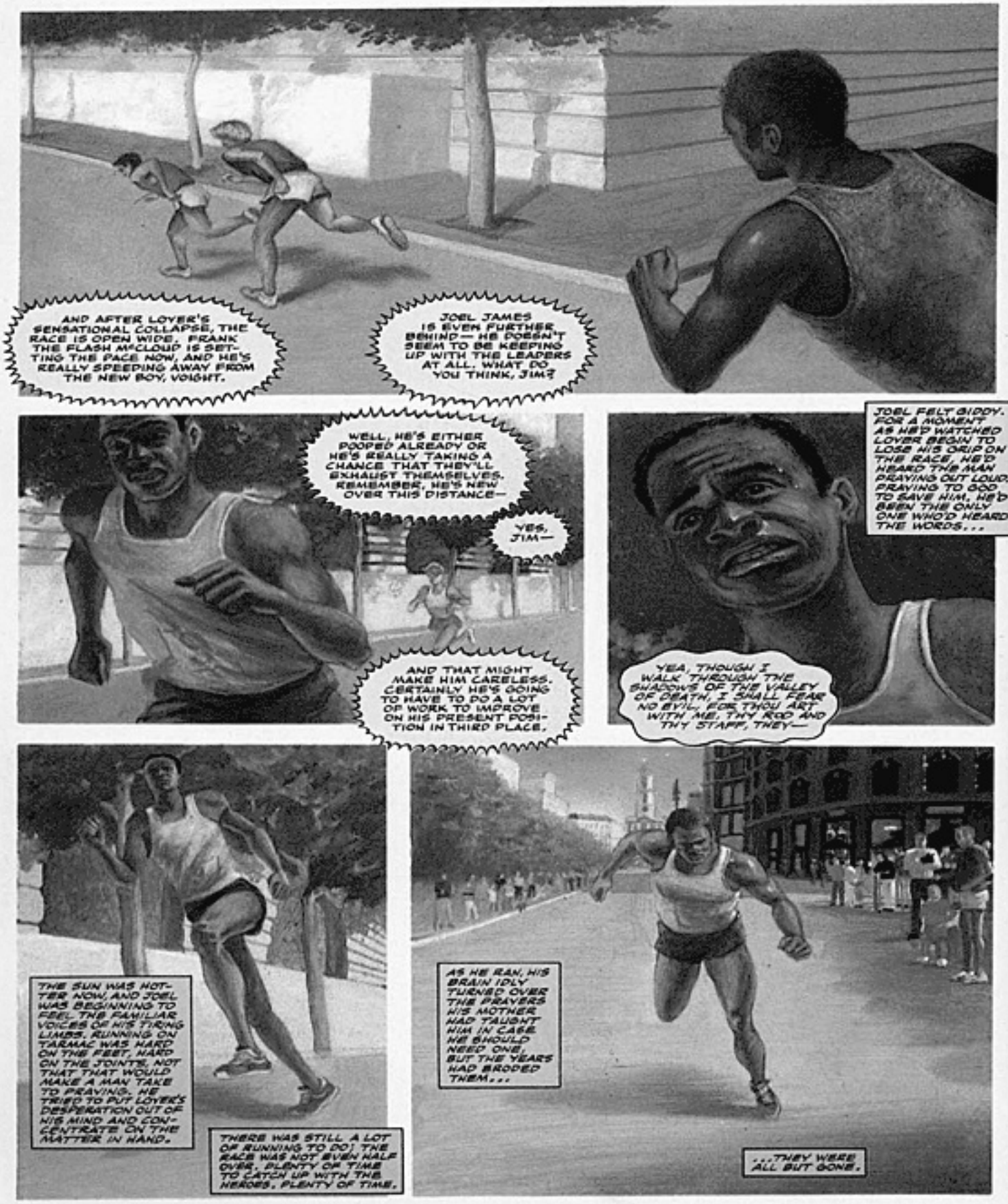
THE DOOR WAS A CHANCE.

THE TWO MOVEMENTS WERE PERFECTLY SYNCOPATED: GOD WAS WITH HIM.


EVEN AS HE CLOSED THE DOOR, HE KNEW HE'D MADE AN ERROR. GOD WASN'T WITH HIM AT ALL.
NEEDLES OF COLD PENETRATED HIS HEAD, HIS TEETH, HIS EYES, HIS FINGERS. HE FELT AS THOUGH HE'D BEEN THROWN NAKED INTO THE HEART OF AN ICEBERG.
HIS BLOOD SEEMED TO STAND STILL IN HIS VEINS. THE SPIT OF HIS TONGUE CRYSTALLIZED. THE MUCUS ON THE LINING OF HIS NOSE PRICKED AS IT TURNED TO ICE.
THE LIGHTER WAS ALREADY GLUED TO HIS HAND, THE SWEAT ON HIS FINGERS TURNED TO FROST. WITH FINGERS SO NUMB THEY COULD HAVE BEEN CUT OFF WITHOUT HIM FEELING IT, HE IGNITED HIS LIGHTER AGAINST THE DARK, AGAINST THE COLD.
THE HOLE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ICE-CAVERN SPARKLED WITH COUNTLESS GALLONS OF FROZEN WATER, AS THOUGH A RIVER HAD BEEN ARRESTED AS IT POURED DOWN INTO THE DARKNESS.
"Where Alph the sacred river ran,
Through caverns measureless to man,
Down to a sunless sea..."
IF THERE WAS INDEED A SEA DOWN THERE, IT WAS A FROZEN SEA. IT WAS DEATH FOREVER.
SHIT.
WHETHER THE WORD ALERTED THE TRIO OUTSIDE, OR WHETHER GOD DESERTED HIM TOTALLY AT THAT MOMENT, HE WOULD NEVER KNOW.
WHOO

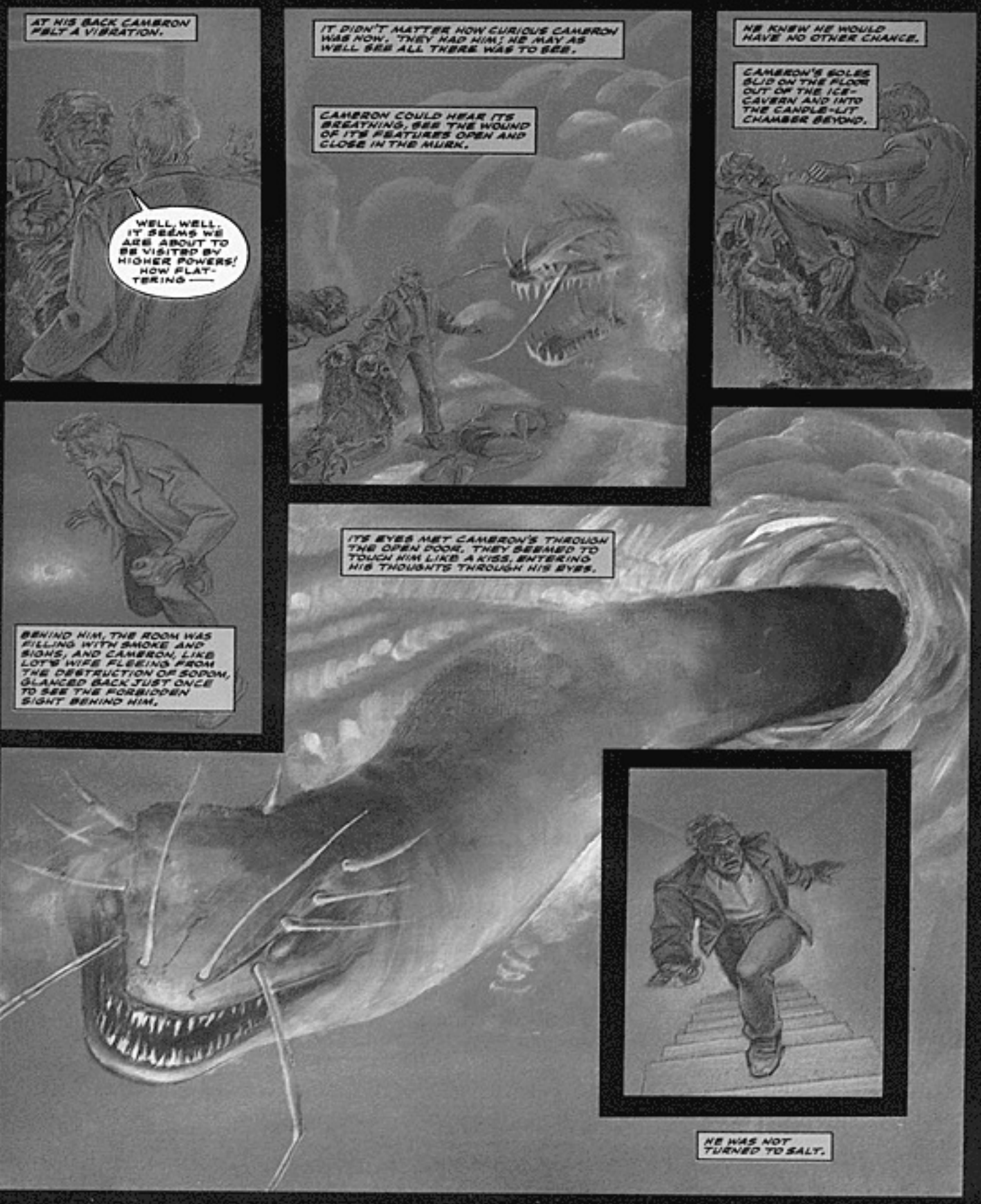

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE, MR. CAMERON?
CAMERON COULD BARELY SPEAK. THE ONLY FEELING LEFT IN HIS HEAD WAS A PINPOINT OF AGONY IN THE MIDDLE OF HIS FOREHEAD.
WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?
PRECISELY THAT, MR. CAMERON. HELL IS GOING ON.


AS THEY RAN PAST ST. MARY-LE-STRAND, LOVER GLANCED BEHIND HIM AND STUMBLED. JOEL, A FULL THREE METERS BEHIND THE LEADERS, KNEW THE MAN WAS GIVING UP.
SO QUICKLY, TOO. THERE WAS SOMETHING AMISS.
JOEL BLACKENED HIS FACE, LETTING McCLOUD AND VOIGHT PASS HIM. NO GREAT HURRY. KINDERMAN WAS QUITE A WAY BEHIND, UNABLE TO COMPETE WITH THESE FAST BOYS. HE WAS THE TORTOISE IN THIS RACE FOR SURE.
LOVER'S BREATH HAD SUDDENLY DESERTED HIM, AND HIS LEGS FELT LIKE LEAD.
BUT THAT WASN'T THE WORST OF IT.
NO ONE ELSE SAW THESE HANDS AND FINGERS, LIKE LOVELESS CHILDREN, SEEKING UP OUT OF THE GROUND TO TOUCH HIM.
HE COLLAPSED INTO THEIR DEAD ARMS EXHAUSTED, HIS YOUTH BROKEN AND HIS STRENGTH SPENT.
THE ENQUIRING FINGERS OF THE DEAD CONTINUED TO PLUCK AT HIM, LONG AFTER THE DOCTORS HAD REMOVED HIM FROM THE TRACK, EXAMINED HIM, AND SEDATED HIM.
HE KNEW WHY, OF COURSE. HE'D LOOKED BEHIND HIM. THAT'S WHAT MADE THEM COME. HE'D LOOKED...

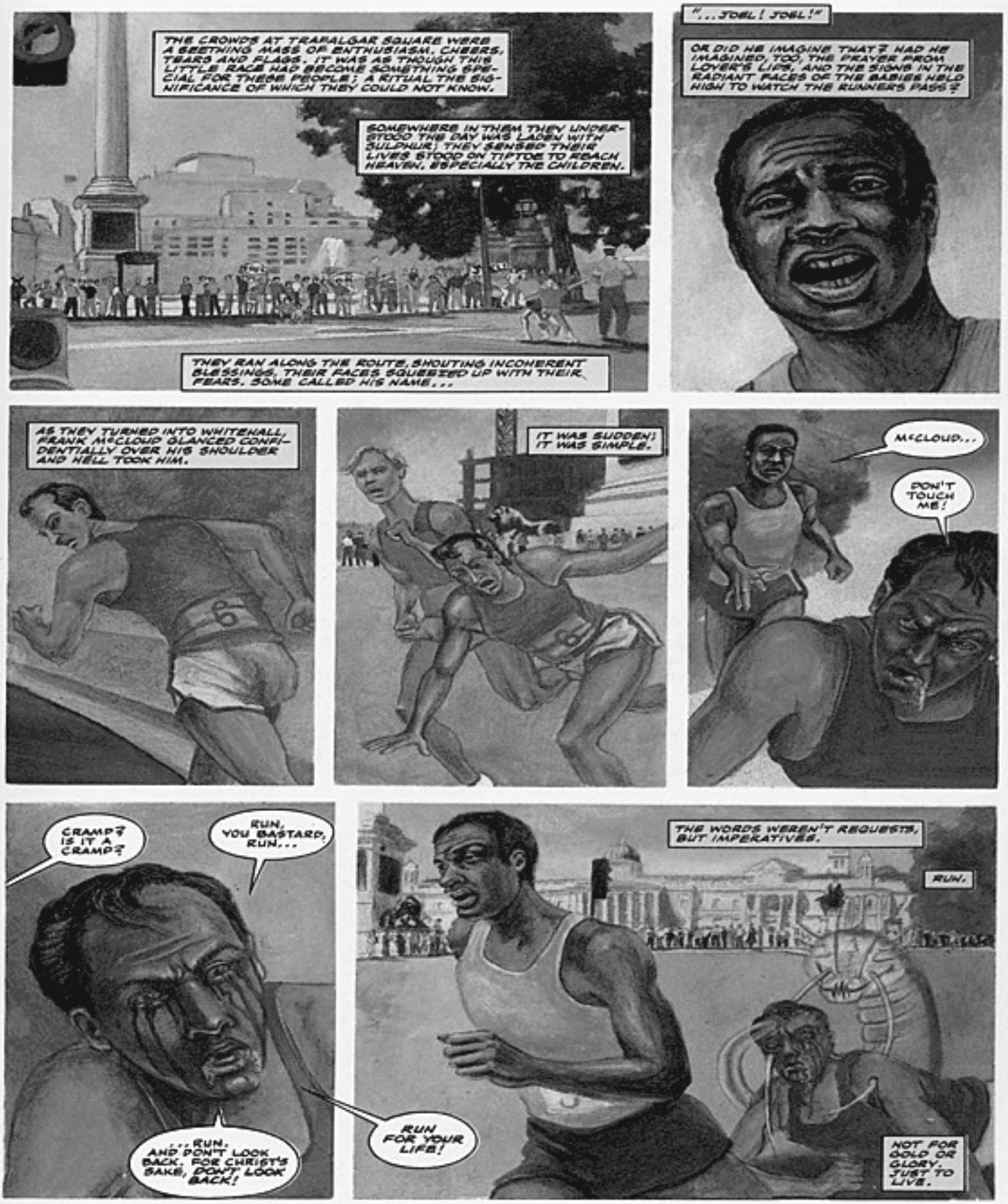

AND AFTER LOVER'S SENSATIONAL COLLAPSE, THE RACE IS OPEN WIDE. FRANK THE FLASH McCLOUD IS SETTING THE PACE NOW, AND HE'S REALLY SPEEDING AWAY FROM THE NEW BOY, VOIGHT.
JOEL JAMES IS EVEN FURTHER BEHIND — HE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE KEEPING UP WITH THE LEADERS AT ALL. WHAT DO YOU THINK, JIM?
WELL, HE'S EITHER POOPED ALREADY OR HE'S REALLY TAKING A CHANCE THAT THEY'LL EXHAUST THEMSELVES. REMEMBER, HE'S NEW OVER THIS DISTANCE—
YES, JIM—
AND THAT MIGHT MAKE HIM CARELESS. CERTAINLY HE'S GOING TO HAVE TO DO A LOT OF WORK TO IMPROVE ON HIS PRESENT POSITION IN THIRD PLACE.
JOEL FELT GIDDY. FOR A MOMENT AS HE'D WATCHED LOVER BEGIN TO LOSE HIS GRIP ON THE RACE, HE'D HEARD THE MAN PRAYING OUT LOUD. PRAYING TO GOD TO SAVE HIM. HE'D BEEN THE ONLY ONE WHO'D HEARD THE WORDS...
YEA, THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE SHADOWS OF THE VALLEY OF DEATH, I SHALL FEAR NO EVIL, FOR THOU ART WITH ME, THY ROD AND THY STAFF, THEY—
THE SUN WAS HOTTER NOW, AND JOEL WAS BEGINNING TO FEEL THE FAMILIAR VOICES OF HIS TIRING LIMBS. RUNNING ON TARMAC WAS HARD ON THE FEET, HARD ON THE JOINTS, NOT THAT THAT WOULD MAKE A MAN TAKE TO PRAYING. HE TRIED TO PUT LOVER'S DESPERATION OUT OF HIS MIND AND CONCENTRATE ON THE MATTER IN HAND.
THERE WAS STILL A LOT OF RUNNING TO DO; THE RACE WAS NOT EVEN HALF OVER. PLENTY OF TIME TO CATCH UP WITH THE HEROES. PLENTY OF TIME.
AS HE RAN, HIS BRAIN IDLY TURNED OVER THE PRAYERS HIS MOTHER HAD TAUGHT HIM IN CASE HE SHOULD NEED ONE, BUT THE YEARS HAD ERODED THEM...
...THEY WERE ALL BUT GONE.

MY NAME IS GREGORY BURGESS. MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT. YOU WOULDN'T KNOW ME. I TRY TO KEEP A LOW PROFILE.
MP?
YES. INDEPENDENT. VERY INDEPENDENT.
IS THAT VOIGHT'S BROTHER?
BROTHER? NO. NO. HE IS MY — WHAT IS THE WORD? FAMILIAR.
SHOW HIM.

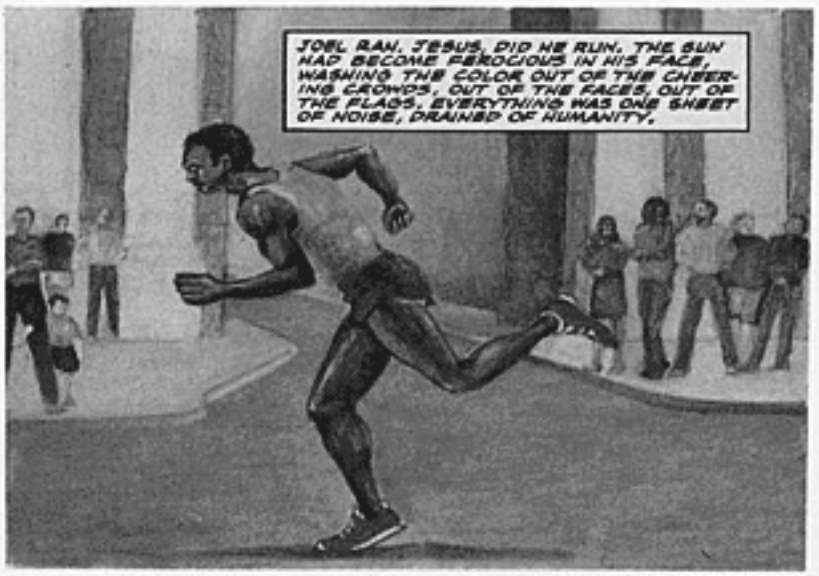
FAMILIARS BOTH, THEY'RE MINE, OF COURSE.
WHAT?
I SERVE HELL, MR. CAMERON, AND IN ITS TURN HELL SERVES ME.
HELL?
BEHIND YOU, ONE OF THE ENTRANCES TO THE NINTH CIRCLE. YOU KNOW YOUR DANTE, I PRESUME?
"LO! DIS; AND LO! THE PLACE WHERE THOU HAS NEED TO ARM THY HEART WITH STRENGTH."
WHY ARE YOU HERE?
TO RUN THIS RACE, OR RATHER MY THIRD FAMILIAR IS ALREADY RUNNING THE RACE. HE WILL NOT BE BEATEN THIS TIME. THIS TIME IT IS HELL'S EVENT, MR. CAMERON, AND WE SHALL NOT BE CHEATED OF THE PRIZE.
HELL?
YOU BELIEVE, DON'T YOU? STILL PRAY BEFORE YOU EAT, LIKE ANY GOD-FEARING SOUL. AFRAID OF CHOKING ON YOUR DINNER.
HOW DO YOU KNOW I PRAY?
YOUR WIFE TOLD ME.
OH, YOUR WIFE WAS VERY INFORMATIVE ABOUT YOU, MR. CAMERON. SHE REALLY OPENED UP TO ME. VERY ACCOMMODATING. SHE GAVE ME SO MUCH... INFORMATION, YOU'RE A GOOD SOCIALIST, AREN'T YOU, LIKE YOUR FATHER...
POLITICS NOW—
OH, POLITICS IS THE HUB OF THE ISSUE, MR. CAMERON. WITHOUT POLITICS WE'RE LOST IN THE WILDERNESS, AREN'T WE? EVEN HELL NEEDS ORDER. NINE GREAT CIRCLES: A PECKING ORDER OF PUNISHMENTS. LOOK DOWN; SEE FOR YOURSELF...
CAMERON COULD FEEL THE HOLE AT HIS BACK: HE DIDN'T NEED TO LOOK.
WE STAND FOR ORDER, YOU KNOW. NOT CHAOS. THAT'S JUST HEAVENLY PROPAGANDA. AND YOU KNOW WHAT WE'LL WIN?
IT'S A CHARITY RACE.
CHARITY IS THE LEAST OF IT. WE'RE NOT RUNNING THIS RACE TO SAVE THE WORLD FROM CANCER, WE'RE RUNNING IT FOR GOVERNMENT.
ONCE EVERY CENTURY THIS RACE IS RUN FROM ST. PAUL'S TO THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER. OFTEN IT HAS BEEN RUN AT THE DEAD OF NIGHT, UNHERALDED, UNAPPLAUDED. TODAY IT IS RUN IN FULL SUNSHINE, WATCHED BY THOUSANDS. BUT WHATEVER THE CIRCUMSTANCES IT IS ALWAYS THE SAME RACE. YOUR ATHLETES AGAINST ONE OF OURS. IF YOU WIN, ANOTHER HUNDRED YEARS OF DEMOCRACY. IF WE WIN... AS WE WILL... THE END OF THE WORLD AS YOU KNOW IT.


AT HIS BACK CAMERON FELT A VIBRATION.
WELL, WELL. IT SEEMS WE ARE ABOUT TO BE VISITED BY HIGHER POWERS! HOW FLATTERING ——
IT DIDN'T MATTER HOW CURIOUS CAMERON WAS NOW. THEY HAD HIM; HE MAY AS WELL SEE ALL THERE WAS TO SEE.
CAMERON COULD HEAR ITS BREATHING, SEE THE WOUND OF ITS FEATURES OPEN AND CLOSE IN THE MURK.
HE KNEW HE WOULD HAVE NO OTHER CHANCE.
CAMERON'S SOLES SLID ON THE FLOOR OUT OF THE ICE-CAVERN AND INTO THE CANDLE-LIT CHAMBER BEYOND.
BEHIND HIM, THE ROOM WAS FILLING WITH SMOKE AND SIGHS, AND CAMERON, LIKE LOT'S WIFE FLEEING FROM THE DESTRUCTION OF SODOM, GLANCED BACK JUST ONCE TO SEE THE FORBIDDEN SIGHT BEHIND HIM.
ITS EYES MET CAMERON'S THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR. THEY SEEMED TO TOUCH HIM LIKE A KISS, ENTERING HIS THOUGHTS THROUGH HIS EYES.
HE WAS NOT TURNED TO SALT.

THERE WAS NO NOISE ON THE STAIRS BEHIND HIM: CLEARLY THEY WERE TOO IN AWE OF THE FLESHLESS VISITOR TO FOLLOW HIM.
GOD HAD BEEN WITH HIM AFTER ALL.
HE HAD TO STOP THE RACE, TO TELL THE WORLD —
AS HE PUT HIS FEET ON THE PETALS, THE LOOK HE HAD EXCHANGED WITH HELL CAUGHT FIRE.
THE LOOK, THE GLANCE BEHIND HIM—
LOT'S WIFE.
LIKE LOT'S STUPID WIFE —
THE LIGHTNING LEAPT BETWEEN HIS EARS, FASTER THAN THOUGHT.
TAILOR
HE TOO, HAD LOOKED BACK.


THE CROWDS AT TRAFALGAR SQUARE WERE A SEETHING MASS OF ENTHUSIASM. CHEERS, TEARS AND FLAGS. IT WAS AS THOUGH THIS LITTLE RACE HAD BECOME SOMETHING SPECIAL FOR THESE PEOPLE; A RITUAL THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHICH THEY COULD NOT KNOW.
SOMEWHERE IN THEM THEY UNDERSTOOD THE DAY WAS LADEN WITH SULPHUR; THEY SENSED THEIR LIVES STOOD ON TIPTOE TO REACH HEAVEN, ESPECIALLY THE CHILDREN.
THEY RAN ALONG THE ROUTE, SHOUTING INCOHERENT BLESSINGS, THEIR FACES SQUEEZED UP WITH THEIR FEARS. SOME CALLED HIS NAME...
"...JOEL! JOEL!"
OR DID HE IMAGINE THAT? HAD HE IMAGINED, TOO, THE PRAYER FROM LOVER'S LIPS, AND THE SIGNS IN THE RADIANT FACES OF THE BABIES HELD HIGH TO WATCH THE RUNNERS PASS?
AS THEY TURNED INTO WHITEHALL, FRANK McCLOUD GLANCED CONFIDENTIALLY OVER HIS SHOULDER AND HELL TOOK HIM.
IT WAS SUDDEN! IT WAS SIMPLE.
McCLOUD...
DON'T TOUCH ME!
CRAMP? IS IT A CRAMP?
RUN, YOU BASTARD, RUN...
...RUN, AND DON'T LOOK BACK. FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, DON'T LOOK BACK!
THE WORDS WEREN'T REQUESTS, BUT IMPERATIVES.
RUN.
RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!
NOT FOR GOLD OR GLORY. JUST TO LIVE.

— WELL, THINGS AREN'T GOING SO WELL FOR THE RUNNERS HERE, JIM. AFTER LOVER GOING DOWN SO SENSATIONALLY, NOW FRANK McCLOUD HAS STUMBLED TOO.
I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING QUITE LIKE IT... BUT McCLOUD SEEMS TO HAVE HAD A FEW WORDS WITH JOEL JONES AS HE RAN PAST, SO HE MUST BE OKAY.


JOEL RAN. JESUS, DID HE RUN. THE SUN HAD BECOME FEROCIOUS IN HIS FACE, WASHING THE COLOR OUT OF THE CHEERING CROWDS, OUT OF THE FACES, OUT OF THE FLAGS. EVERYTHING WAS ONE SHEET OF NOISE, DRAINED OF HUMANITY.

JOEL KNEW THE FEELING THAT WAS COMING OVER HIM, THE SENSE OF DISLOCATION THAT ACCOMPANIED FATIGUE AND OVER-OXYGENATION. HE WAS RUNNING IN A BUBBLE OF HIS OWN CONSCIOUSNESS, THINKING, SWEATING, SUFFERING BY HIMSELF, FOR HIMSELF, IN THE NAME OF HIMSELF.

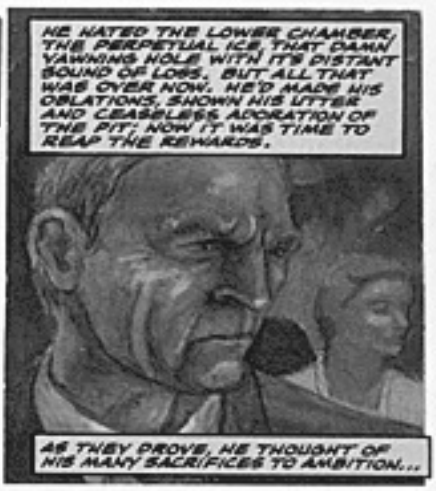
AND IT WASN'T SO BAD, THIS BEING ALONE. SONGS BEGAN TO FILL HIS HEAD, SNATCHES OF HYMNS, SWEET PHRASES FROM LOVE-SONGS, DIRTY RHYMES, HIS SELF IDLED, AND HIS DREAM-MIND, UNNAMED AND FEARLESS, TOOK OVER.

THAT WAS THE ENEMY, THAT WAS THE THING TO BE SURPASSED, VOIGHT, WITH HIS SHINING CRUCIFIX ROCKING IN THE SUN.

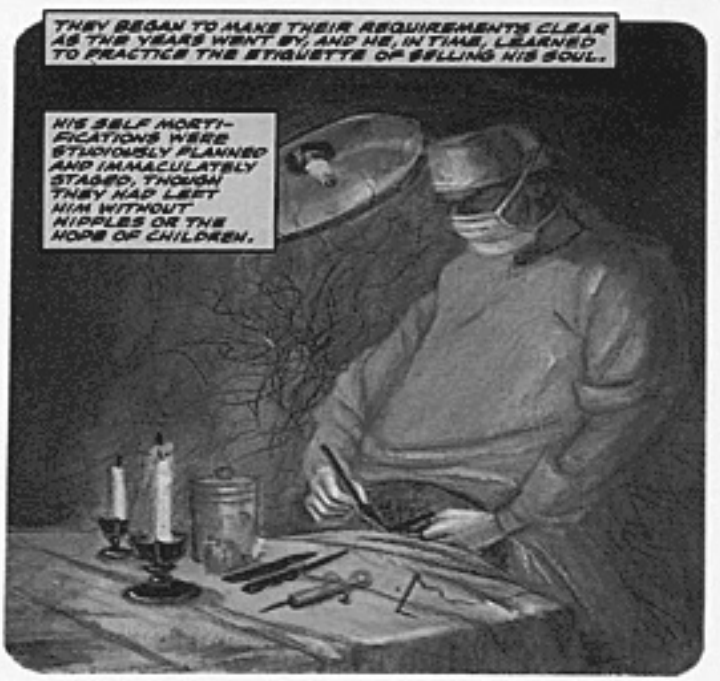
HE COULD DO IT, AS LONG AS HE DIDN'T LOOK, AS LONG AS HE DIDN'T LOOK—
BEHIND HIM.

TIME HAD BEEN WASTED, VALUABLE TIME. HE SHOULD BE AT THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT, AT THE FINISHING LINE, READY TO WELCOME THE RUNNERS HOME. THERE WAS A SCENE TO PLAY, IN WHICH BURGESS WOULD PRETEND THIS MILD AND SMILING FACE OF DEMOCRACY. AND TOMORROW? NOT SO MILD.

HIS HANDS WERE CLAMMY WITH EXCITEMENT, AND HIS SUIT SMELT OF THE GOAT-SKIN COAT HE WAS OBLIGED TO WEAR IN THE ROOM. STILL, NOBODY WOULD NOTICE; AND EVEN IF THEY DID, WHAT ENGLISHMAN WOULD BE SO IMPOLITE TO MENTION THAT HE SMELT GOATY?

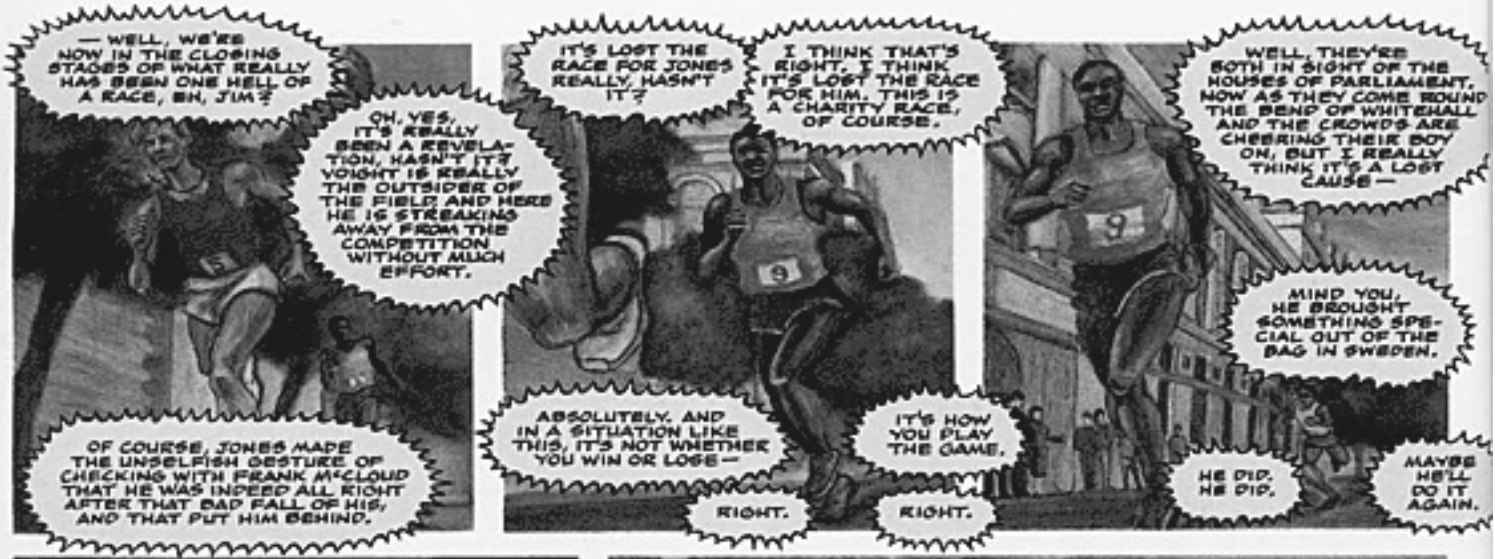

HE HATED THE LOWER CHAMBER, THE PERPETUAL ICE, THAT DAMN YAWNING HOLE WITH ITS DISTANT SOUND OF LOSS. BUT ALL THAT WAS OVER NOW. HE'D MADE HIS OBLATIONS, SHOWN HIS UTTER AND CEASELESS ADORATION OF THE PIT; NOW IT WAS TIME TO REAP THE REWARDS.
AS THEY PROVE, HE THOUGHT OF HIS MANY SACRIFICES TO AMBITION...

AT FIRST, MINOR STUFF: KITTENS AND COCKERELS. LATER HE WAS TO DISCOVER HOW RIDICULOUS THEY THOUGHT SUCH GESTURES WERE.
BUT AT THE BEGINNING HE'D BEEN INNOCENT: NOT KNOWING WHAT TO GIVE OR HOW TO GIVE IT.

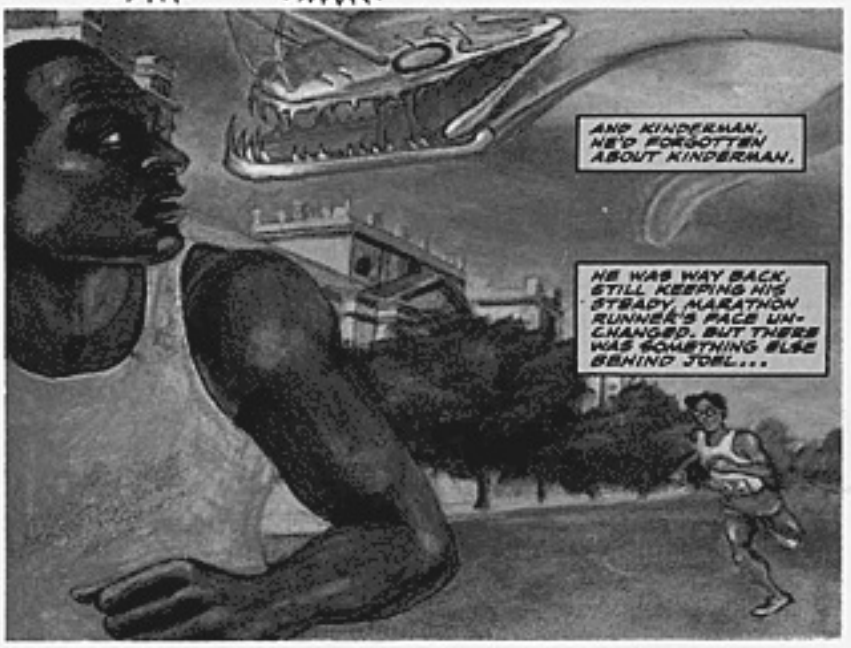

THEY BEGAN TO MAKE THEIR REQUIREMENTS CLEAR AS THE YEARS WENT BY, AND HE, IN TIME, LEARNED TO PRACTICE THE ETIQUETTE OF SELLING HIS SOUL.
HIS SELF MORTIFICATIONS WERE STUDIOUSLY PLANNED AND IMMACULATELY STAGED, THOUGH THEY HAD LEFT HIM WITHOUT NIPPLES OR THE HOPE OF CHILDREN.

IT WAS WORTH THE PAIN THOUGH! THE POWER CAME TO HIM BY DEGREES.
A TRIPLE FIRST AT OXFORD, A WIFE ENDOWED BEYOND THE DREAMS OF AVARICE, A SEAT IN PARLIAMENT, AND SOON, SOON ENOUGH, THE COUNTRY ITSELF.

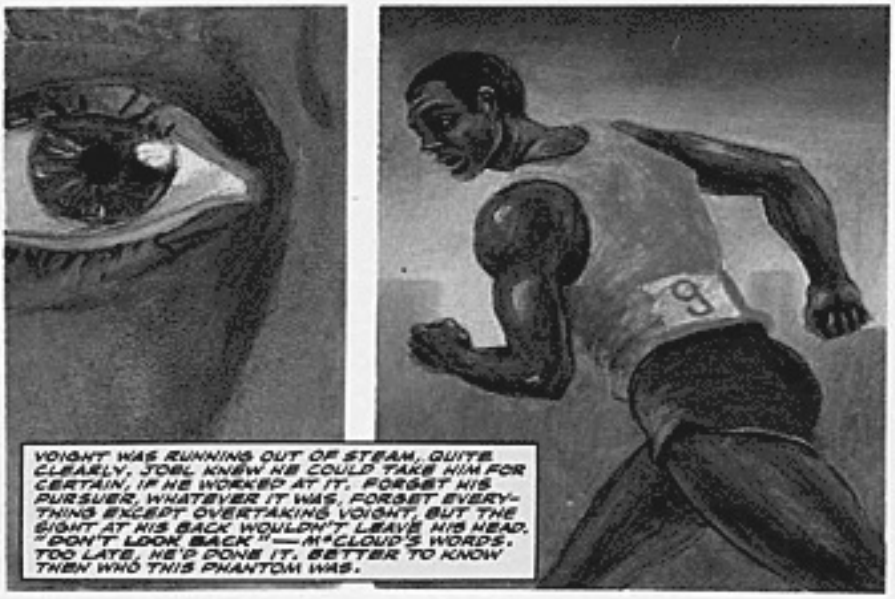
THE CAUTERIZED STUMPS OF HIS THUMBS BEGAN TO ACHE, AS THEY OFTEN DID WHEN HE WAS NERVOUS.


— WELL, WE'RE NOW IN THE CLOSING STAGES OF WHAT REALLY HAS BEEN ONE HELL OF A RACE, EH, JIM?
OH, YES, IT'S REALLY BEEN A REVELATION, HASN'T IT? VOIGHT IS REALLY THE OUTSIDER OF THE FIELD AND HERE HE IS STREAKING AWAY FROM THE COMPETITION WITHOUT MUCH EFFORT.
OF COURSE, JONES MADE THE UNSELFISH GESTURE OF CHECKING WITH FRANK M'CLOUD THAT HE WAS INDEED ALL RIGHT AFTER THAT BAD FALL OF HIS, AND THAT PUT HIM BEHIND.
IT'S LOST THE RACE FOR JONES REALLY, HASN'T IT?
I THINK THAT'S RIGHT. I THINK IT'S LOST THE RACE FOR HIM. THIS IS A CHARITY RACE, OF COURSE.
ABSOLUTELY. AND IN A SITUATION LIKE THIS, IT'S NOT WHETHER YOU WIN OR LOSE—
RIGHT.
IT'S HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME.
RIGHT.
WELL, THEY'RE BOTH IN SIGHT OF THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT, NOW AS THEY COME ROUND THE BEND OF WHITEHALL AND THE CROWDS ARE CHEERING THEIR BOY ON, BUT I REALLY THINK IT'S A LOST CAUSE—
MIND YOU, HE BROUGHT SOMETHING SPECIAL OUT OF THE BAG IN SWEDEN.
HE DID. HE DID.
MAYBE HE'LL DO IT AGAIN.

THE MAN WAS NOT AS FAST AS HE HAD BEEN; JOEL KNEW. THERE WAS A SLOWING THERE, AN UNEVENNESS HAD CREPT INTO HIS STRIDE, A SURE SIGN OF FATIGUE.
HE COULD TAKE HIM. WITH COURAGE, HE COULD TAKE HIM.


AND KINDERMAN. HE'D FORGOTTEN ABOUT KINDERMAN.
HE WAS WAY BACK, STILL KEEPING HIS STEADY MARATHON RUNNER'S PACE UNCHANGED. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE BEHIND JOEL...

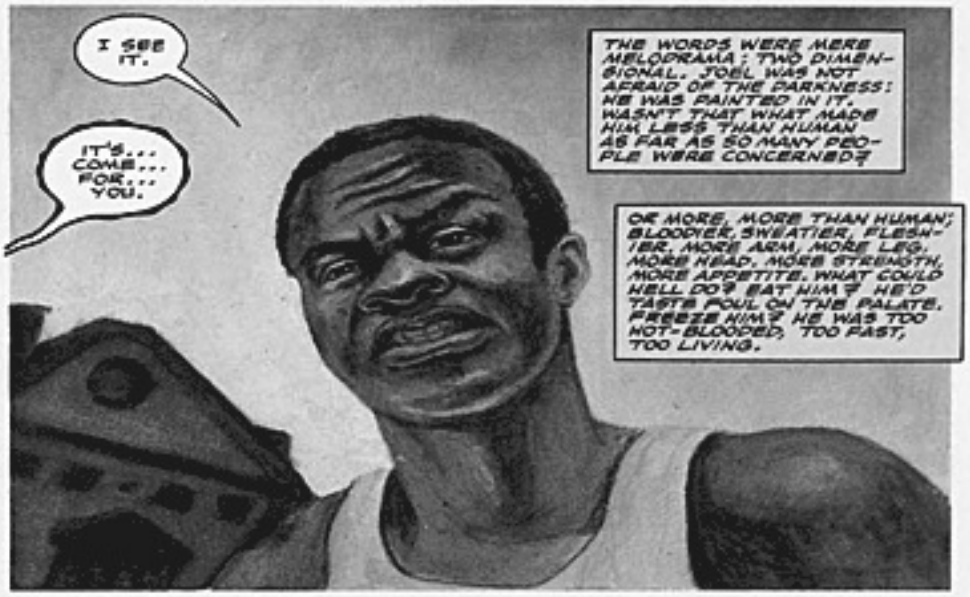
STUPID, STUPID!


VOIGHT WAS RUNNING OUT OF STEAM, QUITE CLEARLY. JOEL KNEW HE COULD TAKE HIM FOR CERTAIN, IF HE WORKED AT IT. FORGET HIS PURSUER, WHATEVER IT WAS. FORGET EVERYTHING EXCEPT OVERTAKING VOIGHT. BUT THE SIGHT AT HIS BACK WOULDN'T LEAVE HIS HEAD. "DON'T LOOK BACK"—M'CLOUD'S WORDS. TOO LATE, HE'D DONE IT. BETTER TO KNOW THEN WHO THIS PHANTOM WAS.

AT FIRST HE SAW NOTHING, JUST KINDERMAN JOGGING ALONG. AND THEN THE GHOST RUNNER APPEARED ONCE MORE, AND HE KNEW WHAT HAD BROUGHT McCLOUD AND LOVER DOWN.
THIS WAS NO RUNNER, LIVING OR DEAD. IT WAS HELL ITSELF THAT WAS PRESSING ON HIM.

"DON'T LOOK BACK."
THIS WAS WHY LOVER HAD MUTTERED PRAYERS AS HE RAN. MUCH GOOD IT HAD DONE HIM; DEATH HAD COME ANYWAY.

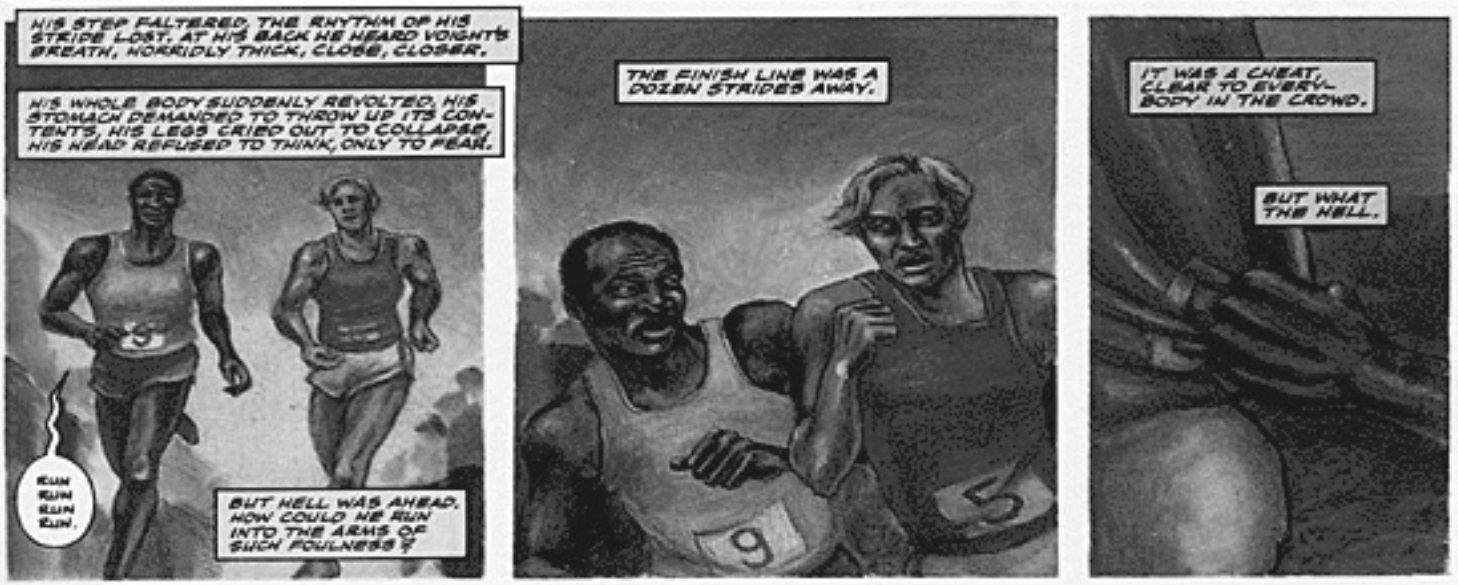
JOEL LOOKED AWAY, NOT CARING TO SEE HELL SO CLOSE, TRYING TO IGNORE THE SUDDEN WEAKNESS IN HIS KNEES.
NOW VOIGHT, TOO, WAS GLANCING BEHIND HIM. THE LOOK ON HIS FACE WAS DARK AND UNEASY, AND JOEL KNEW SOMEHOW THAT HE BELONGED TO HELL, THAT THE SHADOW BEHIND HIM WAS VOIGHT'S MASTER.
VOIGHT, VOIGHT, VOIGHT, VOIGHT—
BLACK BASTARD,
LOOK... BEHIND... YOU.


I SEE IT.
IT'S... COME... FOR... YOU.
THE WORDS WERE MERE MELODRAMA: TWO DIMENSIONAL. JOEL WAS NOT AFRAID OF THE DARKNESS: HE WAS PAINTED IN IT. WASN'T THAT WHAT MADE HIM LESS THAN HUMAN AS FAR AS SO MANY PEOPLE WERE CONCERNED?
OR MORE, MORE THAN HUMAN; BLOODIER, SWEATIER, FLESHIER, MORE ARM, MORE LEG, MORE HEAD, MORE STRENGTH, MORE APPETITE. WHAT COULD HELL DO? EAT HIM? HE'D TASTE FOUL ON THE PALATE. FREEZE HIM? HE WAS TOO HOT-BLOODED, TOO FAST, TOO LIVING.

NOTHING WOULD TAKE HIM. HE WAS A BARBARIAN WITH THE MANNERS OF A GENTLEMAN, NEITHER NIGHT NOR DAY ENTIRELY.
LISTEN... TO... ME.
WHAT ARE YOU?
POWER... I'LL GET YOU POWER... JUST... LET... US... WIN.

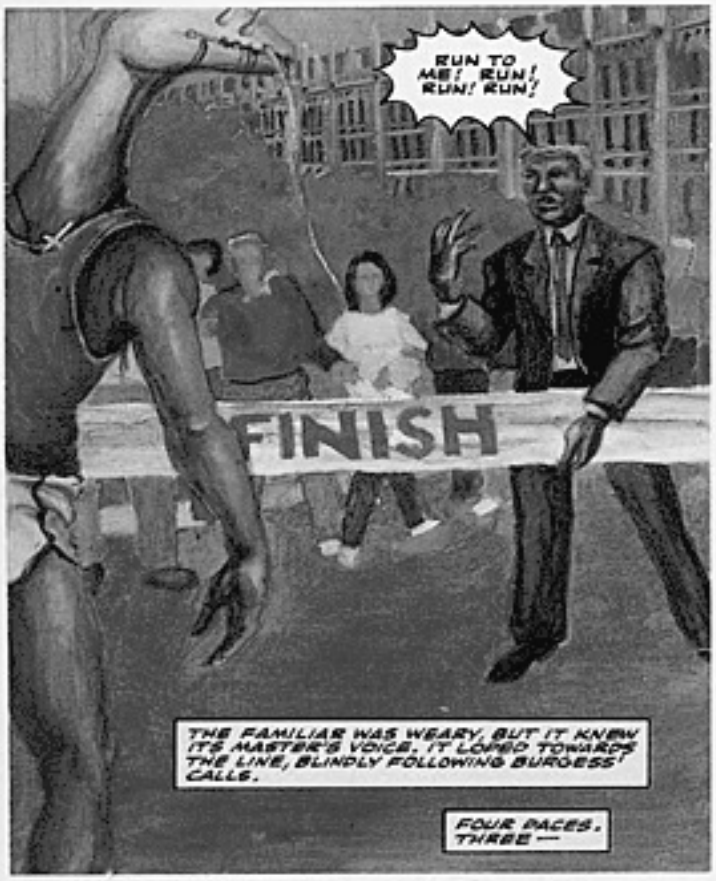
HELL BEHIND HIM, HELL BESIDE HIM— WHAT DID HE CARE? HE COULD RUN.
TOO LATE.
BASTARD. BASTARD. BASTARD—

IT WAS VICTORY AHEAD. HE DIDN'T KNOW FOR WHAT CAUSE, BUT VICTORY NONETHELESS. AND THERE WAS CAMERON, SHOUTING HIM ON.
HE RAN, IF ANYTHING, A LITTLE FASTER TOWARDS THE FINISHING LINE, HIS STRENGTH COAXED BY CAMERON'S FACE.
FINISH
THIS WASN'T CAMERON. CAMERON WAS NOWHERE TO BE SEEN. SO CAMERON WAS GONE.
JOEL FELT SUDDEN DESPAIR. HELL BEHIND. HELL IN FRONT.


HIS STEP FALTERED. THE RHYTHM OF HIS STRIDE LOST. AT HIS BACK HE HEARD VOIGHT'S BREATH, HORRIDLY THICK, CLOSE, CLOSER.
HIS WHOLE BODY SUDDENLY REVOLTED. HIS STOMACH DEMANDED TO THROW UP ITS CONTENTS, HIS LEGS CRIED OUT TO COLLAPSE, HIS HEAD REFUSED TO THINK, ONLY TO FEAR.
RUN RUN RUN RUN.
BUT HELL WAS AHEAD. HOW COULD HE RUN INTO THE ARMS OF SUCH FOULNESS?
THE FINISH LINE WAS A DOZEN STRIDES AWAY.
IT WAS A CHEAT. CLEAR TO EVERYBODY IN THE CROWD.
BUT WHAT THE HELL.

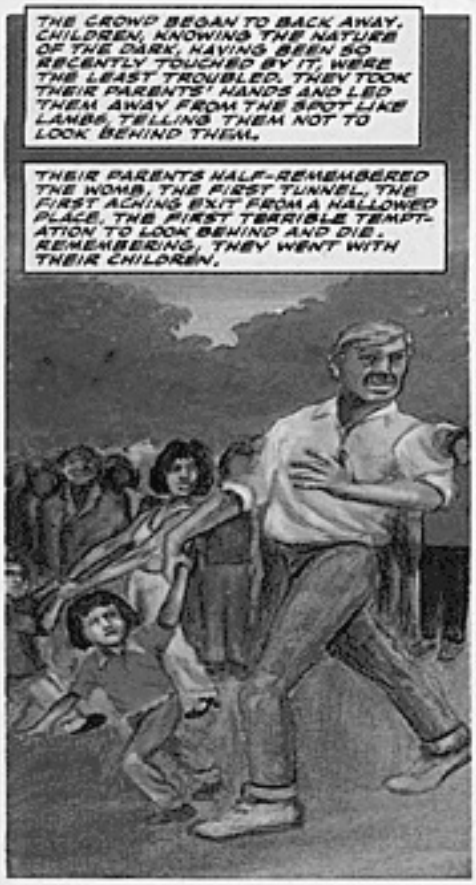
AAAGH!
JOEL HEARD HIS FOREARM SNAP A MOMENT BEFORE HE FELT THE SPASM.
KRAK

GET UP! GET UP!
UNGH...
BUT JOEL HAD SNATCHED VOIGHT WITH HIS ONE GOOD ARM, AND NOTHING WAS GOING TO MAKE HIM LET GO.
THE FAMILIAR PLAYING VOIGHT WAS EXHAUSTED. IT HAD NEVER BEEN SO TIRED, UNPREPARED FOR THE STRESS OF THE RACE ITS MASTER HAD DEMANDED IT RUN.
HAR. Phet.
SHOW YOURSELF!
ITS TEMPER WAS SHORT, ITS CONTROL PERILOUSLY CLOSE TO SNAPPING. JOEL COULD SMELL ITS BREATH ON HIS FACE, AND IT WAS THE SMELL OF A GOAT.
ALL AROUND, THE CROWD SHRANK BACK, PEOPLE SHRIEKED; PEOPLE FAINTED. THIS TRANSFORMATION WAS NOT JUST FOR HIS BENEFIT! IT WAS COMMON KNOWLEDGE.
HELP ME!
THEY WERE SEEING IT ALL, THE TRUTH, THE FILTHY GAPING TRUTH.
NOBODY STEPPED FORWARD. IT WAS PURELY A SPECTATOR SPORT, WRESTLING WITH THE DEVIL. NOTHING TO DO WITH THEM.
HERE! HEEL!
FINISH
BURGESS DIDN'T CARE HOW HE APPEARED TO THE WORLD. THE RACE WAS EVERYTHING; A VICTORY WAS A VICTORY, HOWEVER IT WAS WON. AND JONES HAD CHEATED AFTER ALL.

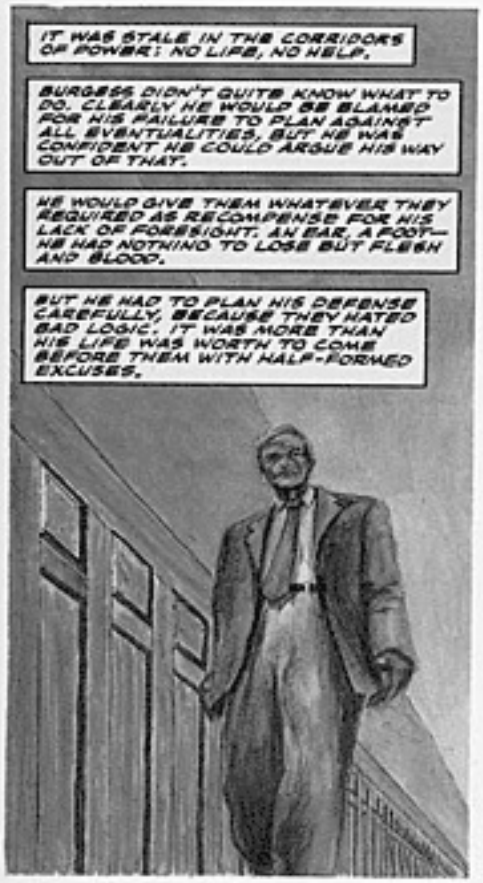

RUN TO ME! RUN! RUN! RUN!
FINISH
THE FAMILIAR WAS WEARY, BUT IT KNEW ITS MASTER'S VOICE. IT LOPED TOWARDS THE LINE, BLINDLY FOLLOWING BURGESS' CALLS.
FOUR PACES. THREE —

SHORT-SIGHTED KINDERMAN, A PACE AHEAD OF VOIGHT, TOOK THE RACE WITHOUT KNOWING THE VICTORY HE HAD WON, WITHOUT EVEN SEEING THE HORRORS THAT WERE SPRAWLED AT HIS FEET.
THERE WERE NO CHEERS AS HE PASSED THE LINE. NO CONGRATULATIONS.

THE AIR AROUND THE STEPS SEEMED TO DARKEN, AND AN UNSEASONAL FROST APPEARED IN THE AIR.
OUR FATHER, WHO WERT IN HEAVEN, UNHALLOWED BE THY NAME —
SUCH AN OLD TRICK. SUCH A NAIVE RESPONSE.


THE CROWD BEGAN TO BACK AWAY. CHILDREN, KNOWING THE NATURE OF THE DARK, HAVING BEEN SO RECENTLY TOUCHED BY IT, WERE THE LEAST TROUBLED. THEY TOOK THEIR PARENTS' HANDS AND LED THEM AWAY FROM THE SPOT LIKE LAMBS, TELLING THEM NOT TO LOOK BEHIND THEM.
THEIR PARENTS HALF-REMEMBERED THE WOMB, THE FIRST TUNNEL, THE FIRST ACHING EXIT FROM A HALLOWED PLACE, THE FIRST TERRIBLE TEMPTATION TO LOOK BEHIND AND DIE. REMEMBERING, THEY WENT WITH THEIR CHILDREN.

THE FAMILIAR, DESERTED, RELINQUISHED ALL CLAIM TO HUMAN APPEARANCE, FOLDING ITSELF INTO THE AIR AND HEADING BACK TO THE CIRCLE IT CALLED HOME.


IT WAS STALE IN THE CORRIDORS OF POWER: NO LIFE, NO HELP.
BURGESS DIDN'T QUITE KNOW WHAT TO DO. CLEARLY HE WOULD BE BLAMED FOR HIS FAILURE TO PLAN AGAINST ALL EVENTUALITIES, BUT HE WAS CONFIDENT HE COULD ARGUE HIS WAY OUT OF THAT.
HE WOULD GIVE THEM WHATEVER THEY REQUIRED AS RECOMPENSE FOR HIS LACK OF FORESIGHT. AN EAR, A FOOT— HE HAD NOTHING TO LOSE BUT FLESH AND BLOOD.
BUT HE HAD TO PLAN HIS DEFENSE CAREFULLY, BECAUSE THEY HATED BAD LOGIC. IT WAS MORE THAN HIS LIFE WAS WORTH TO COME BEFORE THEM WITH HALF-FORMED EXCUSES.

THERE WAS A CHILL BEHIND HIM; HE KNEW WHAT IT WAS. HELL HAD FOLLOWED HIM ALONG THESE SILENT CORRIDORS, EVEN INTO THE VERY WOMB OF DEMOCRACY.
HE WOULD SURVIVE, THOUGH, AS LONG AS HE DIDN'T TURN ROUND; AS LONG AS HE KEPT HIS EYES ON THE FLOOR, OR ON HIS THUMBLESS HANDS, NO HARM WOULD COME TO HIM. THAT WAS ONE OF THE FIRST LESSONS ONE LEARNED, DEALING WITH THE GULPS.

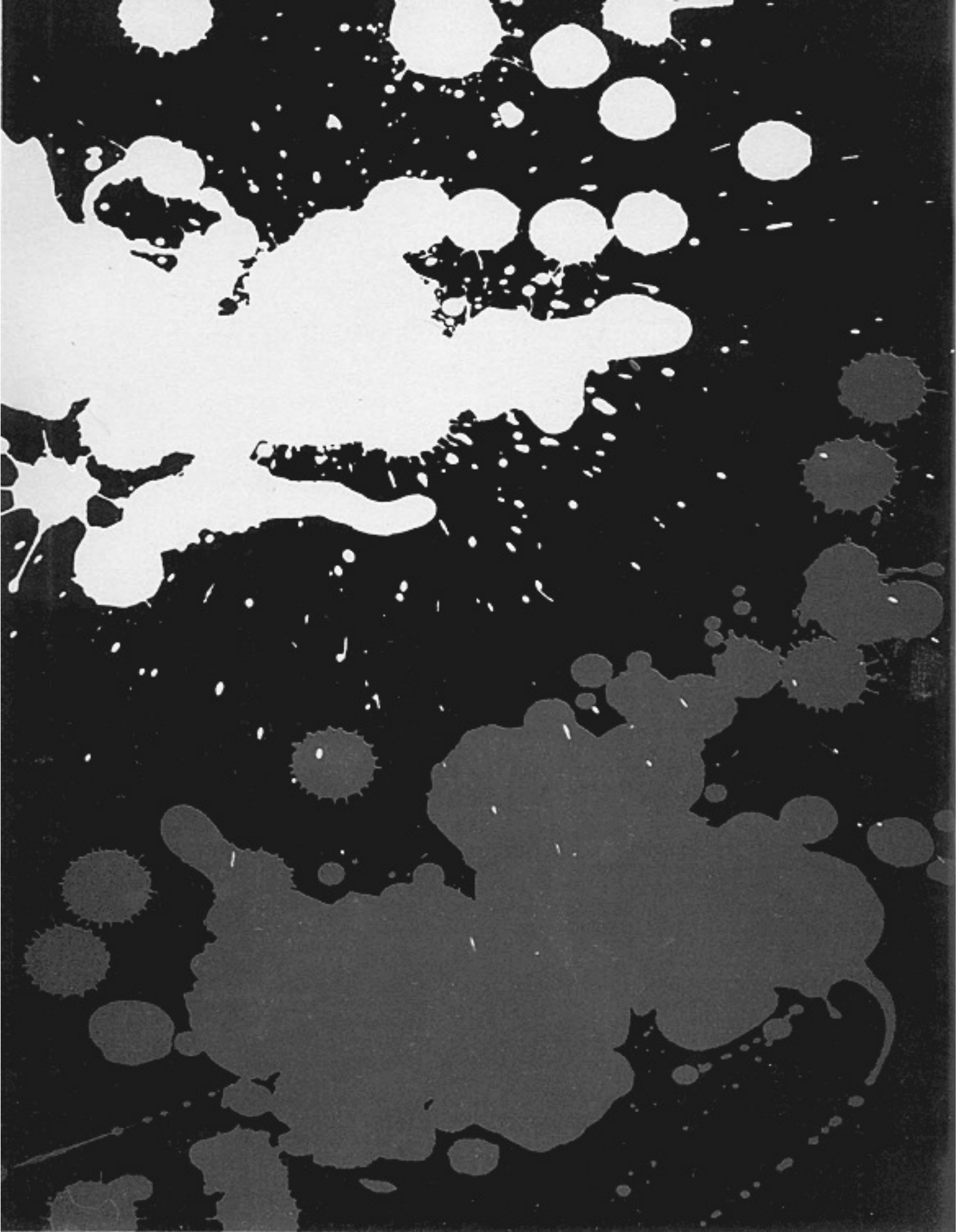
I'M SORRY.
THE VOICE THAT CAME BACK TO HIM WAS MILDER THAN HE EXPECTED.
IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT.
NO. IT WAS AN ERROR AND I AM CONTRITE. I OVERLOOKED KINDERMAN.

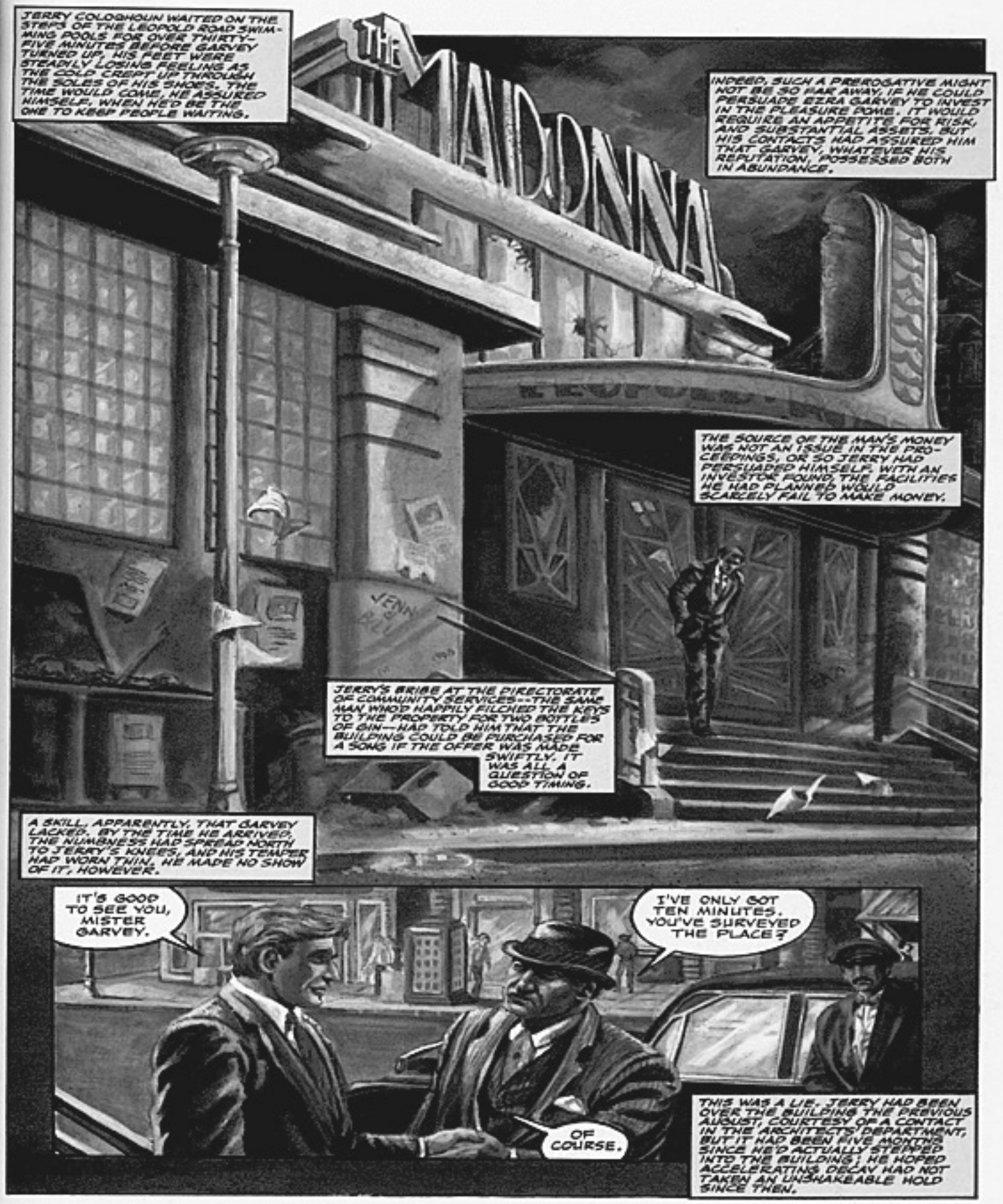
THAT WAS A MISTAKE. WE ALL MAKE THEM. STILL, IN ANOTHER HUNDRED YEARS, WE'LL TRY AGAIN. DEMOCRACY IS A NEW CULT; IT'S NOT LOST ITS SUPERFICIAL GLAMOUR YET. WE'LL GIVE IT ANOTHER CENTURY AND HAVE THE BEST OF THEM THEN.
YES.

BUT YOU—
I KNOW.
NO POWER FOR YOU, GREGORY.
NO.

IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD, GREGORY. LOOK AT ME.
NOT AT THE MOMENT, IF YOU DON'T MIND.
BURGESS KEPT WALKING, STEADY STEP UPON STEADY STEP. KEEP IT CALM, KEEP IT RATIONAL.

LOOK AT ME.
LATER, SIR.
I'M ONLY ASKING YOU TO LOOK AT ME.
A LITTLE RESPECT WOULD BE APPRECIATED.
I WILL I WILL — REALLY. LATER.
THE CORRIDOR DIVIDED HERE. BURGESS TOOK THE LEFT-HAND FORK. HE THOUGHT THE SYMBOLISM MIGHT FLATTER.
IT WAS A CUL-DE-SAC.
LOOK AT ME. TURN AND LOOK AT ME.
WHAT WAS HE TO DO NOW? BACK OUT OF THE CORRIDOR AND FIND ANOTHER WAY WAS BEST, PRESUMABLY. HE'D JUST HAVE TO WALK AROUND AND AROUND IN CIRCLES UNTIL HE'D AROUSED HIS POINT SUFFICIENTLY WELL FOR HIS PURSUER TO LEAVE HIM BE.
AS HE STOOD, JUGGLING THE ALTERNATIVES, HE FELT A SLIGHT ACHE IN HIS NECK.
LOOK AT ME.
AND HIS THROAT WAS CONSTRICTED. THERE WAS, STRANGELY, A GRINDING IN HIS HEAD, THE SOUND OF BONE RASPING BONE. IT FELT LIKE A KNIFE WAS LODGED IN THE BASE OF HIS SKULL.
LOOK AT ME.
BURGESS' HEAD TURNED.
NOT HIS BODY. THAT STAYED STANDING, FACING THE BLANK WALL OF THE CUL-DE-SAC.
BUT HIS HEAD CRANKED AROUND ON ITS SLENDER AXIS, DISREGARDING REASON AND ANATOMY. HIS EYES BLED, HIS EARS POPPED, AND HE DIED, LOOKING AT THAT SUNLESS, UNBEGOTTEN FACE.
"I TOLD YOU TO LOOK AT ME," SAID HELL AND WENT ITS BITTER WAY, LEAVING HIM STANDING THERE, A FINE PARADOX FOR THE DEMOCRATS TO FIND WHEN THEY CAME, BUSTLING WITH WORDS, INTO THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER.
THE END




JERRY COLOGHOUN WAITED ON THE STEPS OF THE LEOPOLD ROAD SWIMMING POOLS FOR OVER THIRTY-FIVE MINUTES BEFORE GARVEY TURNED UP, HIS FEET WERE STEADILY LOSING FEELING AS THE COLD CREPT UP THROUGH THE SOLES OF HIS SHOES. THE TIME WOULD COME, HE ASSURED HIMSELF, WHEN HE'D BE THE ONE TO KEEP PEOPLE WAITING.
THE MADONNA
INDEED, SUCH A PREROGATIVE MIGHT NOT BE SO FAR AWAY, IF HE COULD PERSUADE EZRA GARVEY TO INVEST IN THE PLEASURE DOME. IT WOULD REQUIRE AN APPETITE FOR RISK, AND SUBSTANTIAL ASSETS. BUT HIS CONTACTS HAD ASSURED HIM THAT GARVEY, WHATEVER HIS REPUTATION, POSSESSED BOTH IN ABUNDANCE.
THE SOURCE OF THE MAN'S MONEY WAS NOT AN ISSUE IN THE PROCEEDINGS, OR SO JERRY HAD PERSUADED HIMSELF. WITH AN INVESTOR FOUND, THE FACILITIES HE HAD PLANNED WOULD SCARCELY FAIL TO MAKE MONEY.
JERRY'S BRIBE AT THE DIRECTORATE OF COMMUNITY SERVICES--THE SAME MAN WHO'D HAPPILY FILCHED THE KEYS TO THE PROPERTY FOR TWO BOTTLES OF GIN--HAD TOLD HIM THAT THE BUILDING COULD BE PURCHASED FOR A SONG IF THE OFFER WAS MADE SWIFTLY. IT WAS ALL A QUESTION OF GOOD TIMING.
A SKILL, APPARENTLY, THAT GARVEY LACKED. BY THE TIME HE ARRIVED, THE NUMBNESS HAD SPREAD NORTH TO JERRY'S KNEES, AND HIS TEMPER HAD WORN THIN. HE MADE NO SHOW OF IT, HOWEVER.
IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU, MISTER GARVEY.
I'VE ONLY GOT TEN MINUTES. YOU'VE SURVEYED THE PLACE?
OF COURSE.
THIS WAS A LIE. JERRY HAD BEEN OVER THE BUILDING THE PREVIOUS AUGUST, COURTESY OF A CONTACT IN THE ARCHITECTS' DEPARTMENT, BUT IT HAD BEEN FIVE MONTHS SINCE HE'D ACTUALLY STEPPED INTO THE BUILDING; HE HOPED ACCELERATING DECAY HAD NOT TAKEN AN UNSHAKEABLE HOLD SINCE THEN.

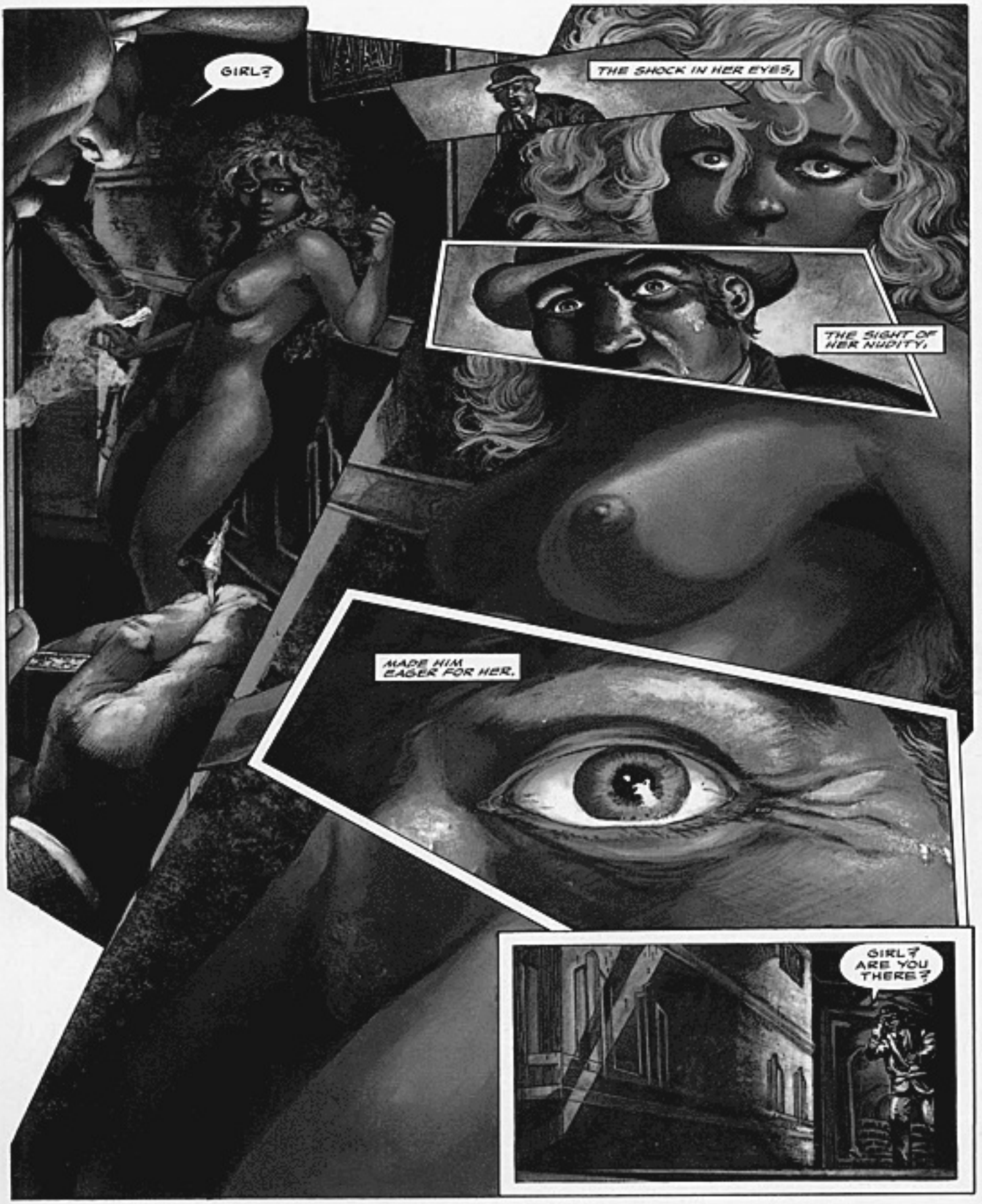
JERRY, EAGER TO BE OUT OF THE COLD, OPENED THE FRONT DOOR AND LED THE WAY INSIDE.
THERE'S NO ELECTRICITY ON. WE HAVE TO GO BY FLASHLIGHT.
I'M SORRY ABOUT THE DELAY.
IT HAPPENS.
I THINK STRONG-ARM TACTICS MAY BE CALLED FOR.
JERRY FELT OUT THE OTHER MAN'S RESPONSE TO A BREAK-IN.
SUITS ME.
OPEN SESAME.
ONCE, NO DOUBT, THE LEOPOLD ROAD POOLS HAD BEEN A SHOWCASE OF DECO DESIGN--OF SHINING TILES AND CUNNING MOSAICS WORKED INTO FLOOR AND WALL. BUT NOT IN JERRY'S ADULT LIFE, CERTAINLY.
THE TILES UNDERFOOT HAD LONG SINCE LIFTED WITH THE DAMP; ALONG THE WALLS THEY HAD FALLEN IN THE HUNDREDS, LEAVING PATTERNS OF WHITE CERAMIC AND DARK PLASTER LIKE SOME VAST AND CLUELESS CROSSWORD PUZZLE. THE AIR OF DESTITUTION WAS SO PROFOUND THAT JERRY HAD HALF A MIND TO GIVE UP HIS ATTEMPT AT SELLING THE PROJECT TO GARVEY ON THE SPOT.
IT COULD BE NO MORE THAN MORBID CURIOUSITY, JERRY FELT, THAT TOOK THE DEVELOPER DEEPER INTO THIS ECHOING MAUSOLEUM. AND YET...
IT'S ATMOSPHERIC. THE PLACE HAS POSSIBILITIES. I DON'T HAVE MUCH OF A REPUTATION AS A PHILANTHROPIST, COLQUHOUN--YOU MUST KNOW THAT--BUT I'VE GOT A TASTE FOR SOME OF THE FINER THINGS.
JERRY THOUGHT IT UNREMARKABLE.
YOU DON'T SEE CRAFTSMANSHIP LIKE THAT NOWADAYS.
IT'S SUPERB.
SHOW ME THE REST.

THE COMPLEX HAD ONCE BOASTED A HOST OF FACILITIES--SAUNA ROOMS, TURKISH BATHS, THERMAL BATHS--IN ADDITION TO THE TWO POOLS. THESE VARIOUS AREAS WERE CONNECTED BY A WARREN OF PASSAGEWAYS THAT, UNLIKE THE MAIN CORRIDOR, HAD NO SKYLIGHTS! THE FLASHLIGHT HAD TO SUFFICE HERE.
DARK OR NO, GARVEY WANTED TO SEE ALL THE PUBLIC AREAS. THE TEN MINUTES HE HAD WARNED WERE HIS LIMIT STRETCHED INTO TWENTY AND THIRTY. THE EXPLORATION CONSTANTLY BROUGHT TO A HALT AS HE DISCOVERED SOME NEW FELICITY TO COMMENT UPON. JERRY LISTENED WITH FEIGNED COMPREHENSION; HE FOUND THE MAN'S ENTHUSIASM FOR THE DECOR CONFOUNDING.
I'D LIKE TO SEE THE--
--HUSH. I HEARD A VOICE.
I DON'T HEAR--
I SAID HUSH!
A TRICK OF THE CORRIDORS. THE ECHOES IN THIS PLACE ARE MISLEADING. SOMETIMES YOU HEAR YOUR OWN FOOTSTEPS COMING BACK TO MEET YOU.
I DID HEAR SOMETHING.
HE LISTENED AGAIN.
THE CORRIDORS WERE PIN-PROP HUSHED.
IT WAS NOT EVEN POSSIBLE TO HEAR THE TRAFFIC ON LEOPOLD ROAD.
LEAD ON.

JERRY DID JUST THAT, THOUGH THE ROUTE TO THE POOLS WAS BY NO MEANS CLEAR TO HIM. THEY TOOK SEVERAL WRONG TURNINGS, WINDING THEIR WAY THROUGH A MAZE OF IDENTICAL CORRIDORS, BEFORE THEY REACHED THEIR INTENDED DESTINATION.
IT'S WARM.
JERRY MURMURED HIS AGREEMENT. IN HIS EAGERNESS TO REACH THE POOLS, HE HAD NOT NOTICED THE STEADILY ESCALATING TEMPERATURE. BUT NOW THAT HE STOOD STILL, HE COULD FEEL A FILM OF SWEAT ON HIS BODY.
THE AIR WAS HUMID, BUT IT SMELLED NOT OF DAMP AND MILDEW, AS ELSEWHERE IN THE BUILDING. THIS WAS A SICKLIER, ALMOST OPULENT SCENT. HE HOPED GARVEY, COCOONED IN THE SMOKE OF HIS CIGAR, COULD NOT SHARE THE SMELL; IT WAS FAR FROM PLEASANT.
PERHAPS THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGINEERS WARMED THE HEATING SYSTEM THROUGH ONCE IN A WHILE, TO KEEP IT IN WORKING ORDER, GARVEY THOUGHT. IN WHICH CASE, WERE THEY IN THE BOWELS OF THE BUILDING SOMEWHERE? PERHAPS GARVEY HAD HEARD VOICES? HE MENTALLY CONSTRUCTED A LINE OF EXPLANATION SHOULD THEIR PATHS CROSS.
THE POOLS.
ALWAYS HAD A FEAR OF WATER. DON'T KNOW WHERE IT COMES FROM.
MY WIFE SAYS IT'S THE WOMB.
THE WOMB ?
I DIDN'T LIKE SWIMMING AROUND IN THERE, SHE SAYS.

TONK
YOU HEAR THAT? THERE'S SOMEBODY IN HERE.
HIS VOICE HAD SUDDENLY RISEN HALF AN OCTAVE.
RATS.
GIVE ME THE TORCH. I DON'T LIKE VERMIN--
--ESPECIALLY THE HUMAN VARIETY. I'VE GOT ENEMIES, MR. COLQHOUN. BUT THEN YOU'VE DONE YOUR RESEARCH ON ME, HAVEN'T YOU? YOU KNOW I'M NO LILY-WHITE.
GARVEY'S CONCERN ABOUT THE NOISES HE THOUGHT HE'D HEARD NOW MADE UNPALATABLE SENSE. IT WASN'T RATS HE WAS AFRAID OF, BUT GRIEVOUS BODILY HARM.
I THINK I SHOULD BE GOING. SHOW ME THE OTHER POOL AND WE'LL BE AWAY.
SURELY.
PROBLEM?
IS THERE ANOTHER WAY IN?
IT MUST BE LOCKED FROM THE INSIDE.
I THINK SO. DO YOU WANT ME TO GO ROUND THE BACK?
TWO MINUTES. I'VE GOT APPOINTMENTS.

GARVEY DIDN'T LIKE THE MAN. HE WAS TOO CLOSELY SHAVEN, AND HIS SHOES WERE ITALIAN. BUT -- THE PROPOSER ASIDE--THE PROJECT HAD SOME MERIT.
GARVEY LIKED THE POOLS WITH ITS APJUNCTS, THE UNIFORMITY OF THE DESIGN, THE BANALITY OF THE DECORATIONS. UNLIKE MANY, HE FOUND INSTITUTIONS REASSURING. HOSPITALS, SCHOOLS, EVEN PRISONS. THEY SMACKED OF SOCIAL ORDER: THEY SOOTHED THAT PART OF HIM FEARFUL OF CHAOS. BETTER A WORLD TOO ORGANIZED THAN ONE NOT ORGANIZED ENOUGH.


GIRL?
THE SHOCK IN HER EYES,
THE SIGHT OF HER NUDITY.
MADE HIM EAGER FOR HER.
GIRL? ARE YOU THERE?

SHE COULD NOT BE FAR, HE REASONED. HE HAD GONE ONLY A FEW STEPS WHEN HE HEARD SOMEBODY BEHIND HIM. IT WAS ONLY THE ITALIAN SHOES.
THERE'S NO NEED TO BLIND ME.
I'M SORRY. THERE'S NO WAY IN.
THERE'S SOMEBODY HERE, COLOQHOUN. A GIRL.
YOU KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT IT, MAYBE?
A GIRL? NO.
SHE WAS STARK NAKED. STANDING THREE OR FOUR YARDS FROM ME.
JERRY LOOKED AT GARVEY, MYSTIFIED. WAS THE MAN SUFFERING FROM SEXUAL DELUSIONS?
I TELL YOU I SAW A GIRL! IF YOU HADN'T ARRIVED, I'D HAVE HAD MY HANDS ON HER. GET SOME LIGHT DOWN THERE!
DAMN.
ALL RIGHT-- LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE.
I'M INTERESTED. THE PROJECT HAS POTENTIAL. DO YOU HAVE A GROUND PLAN OF THE PLACE?
NO, BUT I CAN GET MY HANDS ON ONE.
DO THAT. AND SEND ME YOUR PROPOSALS IN MORE DETAIL. THEN WE'LL TALK AGAIN.

IT TOOK A CONSIDERABLE BRIBE TO GET THE PLANS OF THE POOLS OUT OF HIS CONTACT AT THE ARCHITECTS' DEPARTMENT, BUT JERRY EVENTUALLY SECURED THEM. ON PAPER, THE COMPLEX LOOKED LIKE A LABYRINTH. AND LIKE THE BEST LABYRINTHS, THERE WAS NO ORDER APPARENT IN THE LAYOUT OF SHOWER ROOMS AND BATHROOMS AND CHANGING ROOMS.

IT WAS CAROLE WHO PROVED THAT THESIS TO BE WRONG.

WHAT IS THIS?

THEY'D HAD FOUR OR FIVE HOURS TOGETHER AT HIS FLAT--HOURS WITHOUT THE BICKERING, THE BAD FEELING THAT HAD SOURED THEIR TIME TOGETHER OF LATE.

IT'S THE GROUND PLAN OF THE SWIMMING POOLS ON LEOPOLD ROAD. DO YOU WANT ANOTHER BRANDY?

NO THANKS.

I THINK I'VE GOT GARVEY IN ON THE DEAL.

YOU'RE GOING TO DO BUSINESS WITH HIM, ARE YOU?

DON'T MAKE ME SOUND LIKE A WHITE SLAVER. THE MAN'S GOT MONEY.

DIRTY MONEY.

WHAT'S A LITTLE DIRT BETWEEN FRIENDS?

SHE LOOKED AT HIM FROSTILY, AND HE WISHED HE COULD HAVE PLAYED BACK THE PREVIOUS TEN SECONDS AND ERASED THE COMMENT.

I THINK GARVEY AND HIS LIKE ARE BAD NEWS. I DON'T CARE HOW MUCH MONEY HE'S GOT. HE'S A VILLAIN, JERRY.

SO I SHOULD JUST FORGET ALL THE HARD LABOR I'VE PUT IN AND ADD THIS FAILURE TO ALL THE OTHERS? CHRIST!

HE WATCHED HER FROM OVER THE RIM OF HIS WHISKEY TUMBLER; SAW THE PARTING DOWN THE MIDDLE OF HER HEAD, AND THE FINE BLONDE HAIR THAT DIVIDED FROM THERE.

WHATEVER THOUGHTS BUZZED BENEATH HER TENDER SCALP THEY WERE A MYSTERY TO HIM. AND HIS TO HER, PRESUMABLY.

IT'S A SPIRAL.

WHAT IS?

THE POOLS. IT'S DESIGNED LIKE A SPIRAL. LOOK.

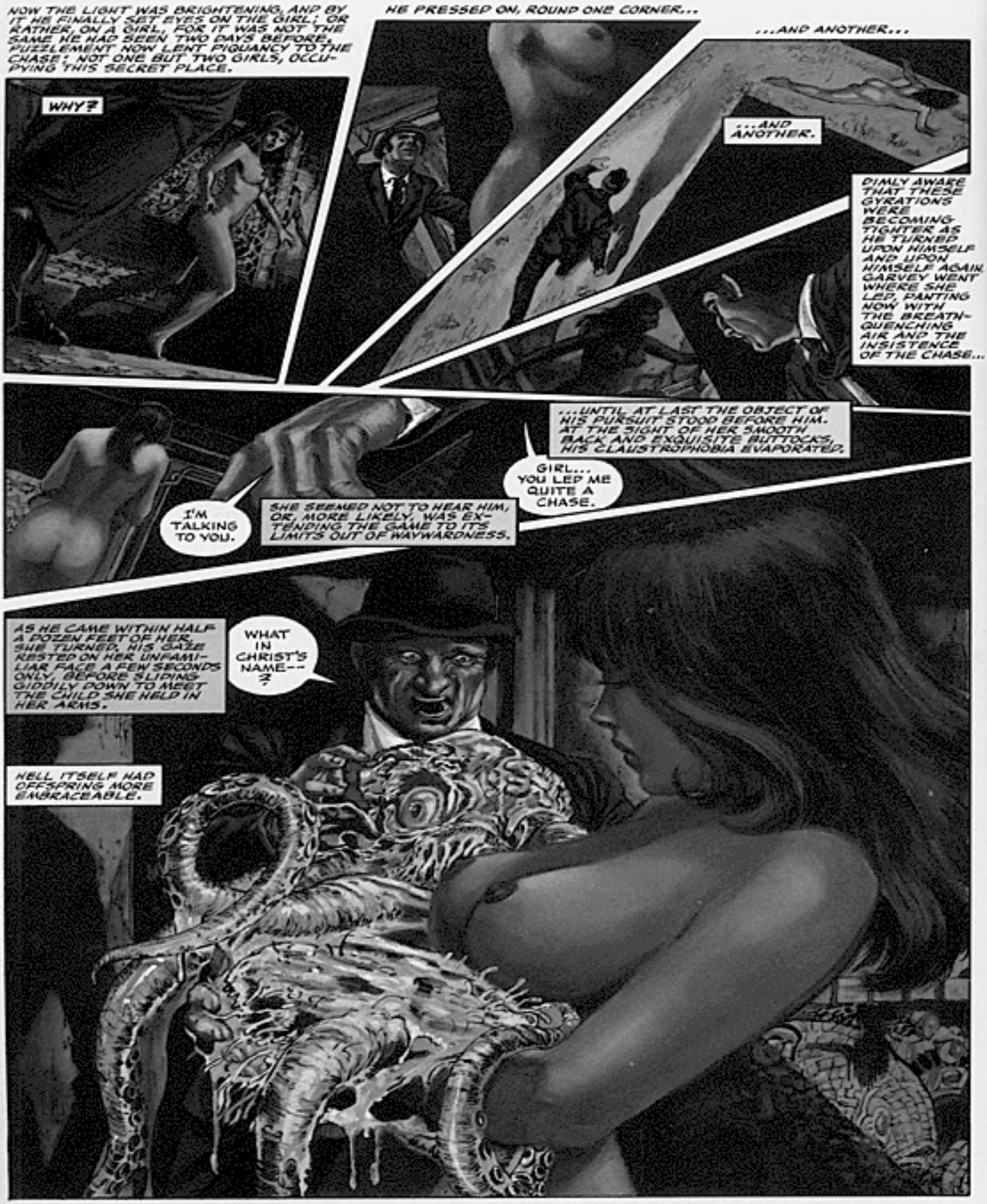
SHE WAS RIGHT. THOUGH THE IMPERATIVES OF THE ARCHITECTS' BRIEF HAD MUDDIED THE CLARITY OF THE IMAGE, THERE WAS INDEED A ROUGH SPIRAL BUILT INTO THE MAZE OF CORRIDORS AND ROOMS. HER CIRCLING FINGERS DREW TIGHTER AND YET TIGHTER LOOPS AS IT DESCRIBED THE SHAPE. AT LAST IT CAME TO REST ON THE LARGE POOL, THE LOCKED POOL.

HE STARED AT THE PLAN IN SILENCE. WITHOUT HER POINTING IT OUT, HE KNEW HE COULD HAVE LOOKED AT THE DESIGN FOR A WEEK AND NEVER SEEN THE UNDERLYING STRUCTURE.

CAROLE DECIDED SHE WOULD NOT STAY THE NIGHT. IT WAS NOT, SHE TRIED TO EXPLAIN AT THE DOOR, THAT THINGS BETWEEN THEM WERE OVER; ONLY THAT SHE VALUED THEIR INTIMACY TOO MUCH TO MISUSE IT AS BANDAGING. HE HALF GRASPED THE POINT; SHE TOO PICTURED THEM AS WOUNDED ANIMALS.

AT LEAST THEY HAD SOME METAPHORICAL LIFE IN COMMON.

SCARCELY A QUARTER-HOUR HAD PASSED SINCE HE'D VISITED THE POOLS WITHOUT EZRA GARVEY THINKING OF THE GIRL HE'D GLIMPSED IN THE CORRIDOR. HER FACE HAD COME BACK TO HIM DURING DINNER WITH HIS WIFE AND SEX WITH HIS MISTRESS. SO UNTRAMMELED, THAT FACE, SO BRIGHT WITH POSSIBILITIES.
GARVEY THOUGHT OF HIMSELF AS A WOMAN'S MAN. UNLIKE MOST OF HIS FELLOW POTENTATES, WHOSE CONSORTS WERE A CONVENIENCE BEST PAID TO BE ABSENT WHEN NOT REQUIRED FOR SOME SPECIFIC FUNCTION, GARVEY ENJOYED THE COMPANY OF THE OPPOSITE SEX. THEIR VOICES, THEIR PERFUME, THEIR LAUGHTER.
HIS GREED FOR THEIR PROXIMITY KNEW FEW BOUNDS; THEY WERE PRECIOUS CREATURES WHOSE COMPANY HE WAS WILLING TO SPEND SMALL FORTUNES TO SECURE. HIS JACKET WAS THEREFORE WEIGHED DOWN WITH MONEY AND EXPENSIVE TRINKETS WHEN HE RETURNED, THAT MORNING, TO LEOPOLD ROAD.
IF I NEED YOU, I'LL SHOUT.
EITHER IT WAS SUBSTANTIALLY COLDER OUTSIDE THAN IT HAD BEEN THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY, OR ELSE THE INTERIOR WAS HOT. HE WELCOMED THE HEAT, REMINDING HIM AS IT DID OF THE SHEEN ON THE DREAM GIRL'S SKIN, OF THE HEAT-LANGUORED LOOK IN HER DARK EYES.
HIS SENSE OF DIRECTION HAD ALWAYS BEEN GOOD; IT TOOK HIM ONLY A SHORT TIME TO FIND HIS WAY TO THE SPOT OUTSIDE THE LARGE POOL WHERE HE HAD ENCOUNTERED THE GIRL. THERE HE STOOD STILL AND LISTENED.
SILENCE. AND YET HE KNEW HE WAS NOT ALONE. WHEN FIVE SENSES FAILED HIM, A SIXTH -- BELONGING, PERHAPS, MORE TO THE BEAST IN HIM THAN THE SOPHISTICATE HIS EXPENSIVE SUIT SPOKE OF -- SENSED PRESENCES. THIS FACULTY HAD SAVED HIS HIDE MORE THAN ONCE. NOW, HE HOPED, IT WOULD GUIDE HIM INTO THE ARMS OF BEAUTY.
TRUSTING TO INSTINCT, HE EXTINGUISHED THE LIGHT AND HEADED OFF DOWN THE CORRIDOR FROM WHICH THE GIRL HAD FIRST EMERGED, FEELING HIS WAY ALONG THE WALLS. HIS QUARRY'S PRESENCE TANTALIZED HIM. HE SUSPECTED SHE WAS A MERE WALL AWAY, KEEPING PACE WITH HIM ALONG SOME SECRET PASSAGE HE HAD NO ACCESS TO.
THE THOUGHT OF THIS STALKING PLEASED HIM. SHE AND HE, ALONE IN THE SWEATING MAZE, PLAYING A GAME THAT BOTH KNEW MUST END IN CAPTURE. HE MOVED STEALTHILY, HIS PULSE TICKING OFF THE SECONDS OF THE CHASE AT NECK AND WRIST AND GROIN. HIS CRUCIFIX WAS GLUED TO HIS BREAST BONE WITH PERSPIRATION.
AGAIN, HE STOOD STILL. THIS TIME, HIS STRAINING EARS WERE REWARDED WITH A SOUND, ACROSS THE ROOM FROM HIM, THE SOFT PAD OF NAKED FEET ON THE TILES.
WAS IT HIS IMAGINATION, OR DID HE EVEN GLIMPSE THE GIRL, HER BODY CARVED FROM THE GLOOM, PALER THAN THE SURROUNDING DARKNESS, AND SMOOTHER?


NOW THE LIGHT WAS BRIGHTENING, AND BY IT HE FINALLY SET EYES ON THE GIRL; OR RATHER, ON A GIRL, FOR IT WAS NOT THE SAME HE HAD SEEN TWO DAYS BEFORE. PUZZLEMENT NOW LENT PIQUANCY TO THE CHASE: NOT ONE BUT TWO GIRLS, OCCUPYING THIS SECRET PLACE.
WHY?
HE PRESSED ON, ROUND ONE CORNER...
...AND ANOTHER...
...AND ANOTHER.
DIMLY AWARE THAT THESE GYRATIONS WERE BECOMING TIGHTER AS HE TURNED UPON HIMSELF AND UPON HIMSELF AGAIN, GARVEY WENT WHERE SHE LED, PANTING NOW WITH THE BREATH-QUENCHING AIR AND THE INSISTENCE OF THE CHASE...
...UNTIL AT LAST THE OBJECT OF HIS PURSUIT STOOD BEFORE HIM. AT THE SIGHT OF HER SMOOTH BACK AND EXQUISITE BUTTOCKS, HIS CLAUSTROPHOBIA EVAPORATED.
GIRL... YOU LEP ME QUITE A CHASE.
I'M TALKING TO YOU.
SHE SEEMED NOT TO HEAR HIM, OR, MORE LIKELY, WAS EXTENDING THE GAME TO ITS LIMITS OUT OF WAYWARDNESS.
AS HE CAME WITHIN HALF A DOZEN FEET OF HER, SHE TURNED, HIS GAZE RESTED ON HER UNFAMILIAR FACE A FEW SECONDS ONLY, BEFORE SLIDING GIDDILY DOWN TO MEET THE CHILD SHE HELD IN HER ARMS.
WHAT IN CHRIST'S NAME--?
HELL ITSELF HAD OFFSPRING MORE EMBRACEABLE.

THE GIRL STARED AT GARVEY'S ALARM, AND A WAVE OF LAUGHTER BROKE OVER HER FACE. THE CHILD IN HER ARMS UNCURLED A PUCKERED LIMB AND CLAMPED IT TO ITS COMFORTER'S BOSOM SO AS TO GET BETTER PURCHASE.
THE GESTURE LASHED GARVEY'S DISGUST INTO RAGE.
SQUAAAAA
SPLUD
OUT BEYOND THE CHAMBER, SOMETHING GAVE VOICE. GARVEY HAD NO DOUBT OF ITS CUE: IT WAS ANSWERING THE DEATH-CRY OF THE CHILD, AND THE RISING WAIL OF ITS MOTHER--BUT THE SOUND WAS MORE DISTRESSING THAN EITHER.
EEEEEE
GARVEY'S IMAGINATION WAS AN IMPOVERISHED FACULTY. BEYOND HIS DREAMS OF WEALTH AND WOMEN LAY A WASTELAND, YET NOW, AT THE SOUND OF THAT VOICE, THE WASTELAND BLOOMED, AND GAVE FORTH HORRORS HE'D BELIEVED HIMSELF INCAPABLE OF CONCEIVING. NOT PORTRAITS OF MONSTERS, WHICH, AT THE BEST, COULD BE NO MORE THAN ASSEMBLIES OF EXPERIENCED PHENOMENA.
WHAT HIS MIND CREATED WAS MORE FEELING THAN SIGHT; BELONGED TO HIS MARROW, NOT TO HIS MIND. ALL CERTAINTY TREMBLED--MASCULINITY, POWER: THE TWIN IMPERATIVES OF DREAD AND REASON--ALL TURNED THEIR COLLARS UP AND DENIED KNOWLEDGE OF HIM. HE SHOOK, AFRAID AS ONLY DREAMS MADE HIM AFRAID, WHILE THE CRY WENT ON AND ON.

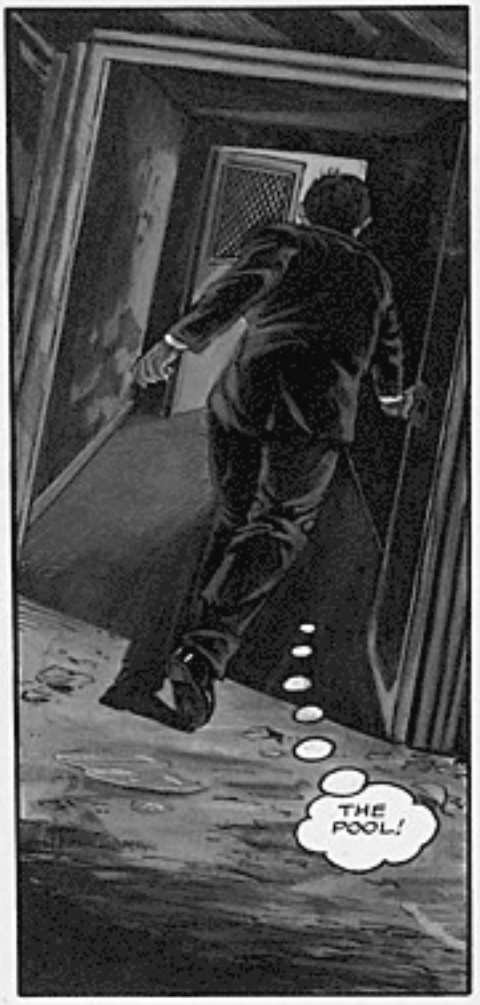
HIS SENSE OF DIRECTION HAD DESERTED HIM. AT THE FIRST INTERSECTION, AND THEN AT THE SECOND, HE MADE AN ERROR. A FEW YARDS ON, HE REALIZED HIS MISTAKE AND TRIED TO DOUBLE BACK, BUT MERELY EXACERBATED THE CONFUSION.

HIS PANIC SPIRALED. THE WAILING HAD NOW CEASED; HE WAS ALONE WITH HIS RASPING BREATH AND HALF-SPOKEN CURSES.

COLQUHOUN WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS TORMENT, AND GARVEY SWORE HE WOULD HAVE IT'S PURPOSE BEATEN OUT OF THE MAN EVEN IF HE HAD TO BREAK EVERY BONE IN COLQUHOUN'S BODY PERSONALLY. HE CLUNG TO THOUGHTS OF THAT BEATING AS HE RAN ON; IT WAS HIS ONLY COMFORT.

INDEED, SO PREOCCUPIED DID HE BECOME WITH THOUGHT OF THE AGONIES HE'D MAKE COLQUHOUN SUFFER, HE FAILED TO REALIZE THAT HE HAD TRACED HIS WAY ROUND IN A CIRCLE.

GARVEY HALTED AND TOOK STOCK OF HIS SITUATION. IF HE WENT BACK THE WAY HE'D COME, THE ROUTE WOULD ONLY CONFOUND HIM AGAIN; IF HE WENT AHEAD, THROUGH THE CHAMBER AND TOWARD THE LIGHT, HE MIGHT CUT THE GORDIAN KNOT AND BE DELIVERED BACK TO HIS STARTING POINT. THE SWIFT WIT OF THE SOLUTION PLEASED HIM.



THIS WAS THE SOURCE OF THE LIGHT. THE WATER IN THE POOL GAVE OFF A PHOSPHORESCENCE THAT TINGED EVERYTHING -- THE TILES, THE DIVING BOARD, THE CHANGING ROOMS (HIMSELF, NO DOUBT) -- WITH THE SAME FULVOUS WASH.
HE LOOKED BACK TOWARD THE WATER, CURIOSITY GETTING THE BETTER OF HIM, THE STEAM SWIRLED: AN EDDY TOYED WITH THE SCUM, AND THERE! HIS EYE CAUGHT SIGHT OF A DARK, ANONYMOUS SHAPE SLIDING BENEATH THE SKIN OF THE WATER.
HE THOUGHT OF THE CREATURE HE'D KILLED, OF ITS FORMLESS BODY AND THE DANGLING LOOPS OF ITS LIMBS. WAS THIS ANOTHER OF THAT SPECIES? THE LIQUID BRIGHTNESS LAPPED AGAINST THE POOLSIDE AT HIS FEET; CONTINENTS OF SCUM BROKE INTO ARCHIPELAGOS. OF THE SWIMMER, THERE WAS NO SIGN.
THEN CAME THE ARRIVAL OF THREE GRACES, THE FERMENTING WATERS OF THE POOL WERE STIRRED INTO A FRENZY AS ITS OCCUPANTS ROSE TO MEET THE WOMEN. GARVEY COULD SEE THREE OR FOUR RESTLESS FORMS TEASING -- BUT NOT BREAKING -- THE SURFACE.
HE WAS CAUGHT BETWEEN HIS INSTINCT TO TAKE FLIGHT (THE ROPE, THOUGH BEFRILLED, WAS STILL A ROPE) AND THE DESIRE TO LINGER AND SEE WHAT THE POOL CONTAINED.
ALL THE DESIRES THAT HAD BROUGHT HIM HERE HAD TAKEN HEED. HE NO LONGER WANTED TO CUP THE BREASTS OF THESE CREATURES, OR PADDLE AT THE INTERSECTION OF THEIR GLEAMING THIGHS.
THESE WOMEN WERE NOT WHAT THEY SEEMED. THEIR QUIETNESS WASN'T DOCILITY, BUT A DRUG-TRANCE; THEIR NAKEDNESS WASN'T SENSUALITY, BUT A HORRID INDIFFERENCE THAT OFFENDED HIM.
EVEN THEIR YOUTH, AND ALL IT BROUGHT -- THE SOFTNESS OF THEIR SKINS, THE GLOSS OF THEIR HAIR -- EVEN THAT WAS SOMEHOW CORRUPT.
HE STOOD, MEETING THE SLUT'S EYES, AS SHE KISSED HIS CHEEK, AND THE BERIBBONED ROPE WAS WRAPPED AROUND HIS NECK.
NNUOH...

JERRY CALLED GARVEY'S OFFICE AT HALF-HOUR INTERVALS THROUGH THE DAY. AT FIRST HE WAS TOLD THAT GARVEY WAS OUT OF THE OFFICE AND WOULD BE AVAILABLE LATER THAT AFTERNOON. AS THE DAY WORE ON, HOWEVER, THE MESSAGE CHANGED. MR. GARVEY IS FEELING UNWELL, THE SECRETARY TOLD HIM; HE WAS GONE HOME TO REST. JERRY LEFT WITH HER THE MESSAGE THAT HE HAD SECURED THE GROUND PLAN TO THE POOLS AND WOULD BE DELIGHTED TO MEET AND DISCUSS THEIR PLANS AT MR. GARVEY'S CONVENIENCE.

JERRY TOOK CAROLE TO A FRENCH MOVIE, WHICH SEEMED, AS FAR AS JERRY COULD GRASP, COMPLETELY LACKING IN PLOT; IT WAS SIMPLY A SERIES OF DIALOGUES BETWEEN CHARACTERS DISCUSSING THEIR TRAUMAS AND THEIR ASPIRATIONS, THE FORMER BEING IN DIRECT PROPORTION TO THE FAILURE OF THE LATTER. IT LEFT HIM FEELING TORPID.

YOU DIDN'T LIKE IT...

AND NO SHOOT OUT.

NOT MUCH. ALL THAT BROW-BEATING.

SHE SMILED TO HERSELF.

WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

"SA

NOTHING.

DON'T SAY NOTHING.

I WAS JUST SMILING, THAT'S ALL. CAN'T I SMILE?

JESUS, ALL THIS CONVERSATION NEEDS IS SUBTITLES. YOU'RE SO INFURIATING--

THAT'S SOMETHING WE HAVE IN COMMON, ANYHOW. YOU DON'T GIVE A FUCK, JERRY. NOT ABOUT ME, NOT ABOUT ANYBODY.

SHE STARED AT HIM, ALMOST DEFYING HIM TO RESPOND. WHEN HE FAILED TO, SHE SEEMED CURIOUSLY SATISFIED.

GOODNIGHT.

HE WATCHED HER TAKE FIVE, SIX, SEVEN STEPS FROM HIM, THE DEEPEST PART OF HIM WANTING TO CALL AFTER HER, BUT A DOZEN IRRELEVANCIES -- PRIDE, FATIGUE, INCONVENIENCE -- BLOCKED HIS DOING SO.

WHAT EVENTUALLY UPROOTED HIM, AND PUT HER NAME ON HIS LIPS, WAS THE THOUGHT OF AN EMPTY BED TONIGHT; OF THE SHEETS WARM ONLY WHERE HE LAY, AND CHILLY AS HELL TO LEFT AND RIGHT OF HIM.

CAROLE...

I SURRENDER. THE FILM WAS A MASTERPIECE, HOW'S THAT?

DON'T, PLEASE DON'T. I'M NOT...

VERY GOOD AT APOLOGIES, HE WANTED TO SAY, BUT HE WAS SO BAD AT THEM, HE COULDN'T EVEN MANAGE THAT MUCH.

NEVER MIND.

SHE WASN'T ANGRY, HE SAW, ONLY MISERABLE.

COME BACK TO THE FLAT.

I DON'T WANT TO.

I WANT YOU TO. I DON'T LIKE TALKING IN THE STREET.

FOUL PERFUME. SOMEBODY'S BEEN UP HERE.
THIS IS PERSONAL, JERRY. I'LL CALL THE POLICE. YOU FIND OUT WHAT'S MISSING.
HE DID AS HE WAS TOLD, WHITE FACED. THE BLOW OF THIS INVASION NUMBED HIM.
AS HE WALKED LISTLESSLY THROUGH THE FLAT TO SURVEY THE PANDEMONIUM, HE FOUND HIMSELF IMAGINING THE INTRUDERS ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS, LAUGHING AS THEY WORKED THROUGH HIS CLOTHES AND KEEPSAKES.
IN THE CORNER OF HIS BEDROOM HE FOUND A HEAP OF HIS PHOTOGRAPHS. THEY HAD URINATED ON THEM.
THE POLICE ARE ON THEIR WAY, JERRY, THEY SAID NOT TO TOUCH ANYTHING.
TOO LATE.
WHAT'S MISSING?
NOTHING.
HE RETURNED TO THE LIVING ROOM AND PROCEEDED TO ROOT THROUGH THE WRECKAGE, BUT HE KNEW DAMN WELL HE WASN'T GOING TO FIND IT. HE WAS ANGRY.
GARVEY.
WHAT ABOUT HIM?
HE CAME FOR THE GROUND PLAN OF THE POOLS, OR SENT SOMEONE.
WHY? YOU WERE GOING TO GIVE IT TO HIM ANYWAY.
ALL THE VALUABLES--THE STEREO AND VIDEO EQUIPMENT, HIS CREDIT CARDS, HIS FEW ITEMS OF JEWELRY--WERE THERE. ONLY THEN DID HE REMEMBER THE GROUND PLAN.
YOU WERE THE ONE WHO WARNED ME TO STAY CLEAR--
I NEVER EXPECTED SOMETHING LIKE THIS.
THAT MAKES TWO OF US.

THE POLICE CAME AND WENT, OFFERING FAINT APOLOGIES FOR THE FACT THAT THEY THOUGHT AN ARREST UNLIKELY.
SO. DO YOU WANT TO STAY HERE OR GO OVER TO MY PLACE?
STAY.
THEY MADE A PERFUNCTORY ATTEMPT TO RESTORE THE FORMER STATUS QUO. THEN THEY TURNED THE SLASHED MATTRESS OVER, LOCATED TWO UN-MUTILATED CUSHIONS, AND WENT TO BED.
HE WANTED TO MAKE LOVE, BUT THAT REASSURANCE, LIKE SO MUCH OF HIS LIFE OF LATE, WAS DOOMED TO FAILURE. THERE WAS NO MAKING GOOD BETWEEN THE SHEETS WHAT HAD BEEN SO BADLY SOURED OUT OF THEM.
HIS ANGER MADE HIM ROUGH, AND HIS ROUGHNESS, IN TURN ANGERED HER.
SHE FROWNED BENEATH HIM, HER KISSES UN-WILLING AND TIGHT. HER RELUCTANCE ONLY SPURRED HIM ON TO FRESH CRASSNESS.
STOP. I DON'T WANT THIS.
I SAID DON'T, JERRY!
HE PUSHED BEFORE SHE COULD FUR-THER HER OBJECTIONS.
HE SHUT OUT HER VOICE. HE WAS HALF AS HEAVY AGAIN AS SHE.
HE CLOSED HIS EYES. SHE TOLD HIM AGAIN TO STOP, THIS TIME WITH REAL FURY, BUT HE JUST THRUST HARDER -- THE WAY SHE'D ASK HIM TO SOMETIMES, WHEN THE HEAT WAS REALLY ON -- BEG HIM TO, EVEN...
STOP!
...BUT NOW SHE ONLY SWORE AT HIM, AND THREAT-ENED, AND EVERY WORD SHE SAID MADE HIM MORE INTENT NOT TO BE CHEATED OF THIS, THOUGH HE FELT NOTHING AT HIS GROIN BUT FULL-NESS AND DIS-COMFORT, AND THE URGE TO BE FINISHED.
HE FELT NEITHER WRETCHED NOR PROUD. THE FRONT DOOR OPENED AND WAS SLAMMED. JERRY WAITED, LISTENING TO CAROLE'S FEET ON THE STAIRS.
IT PASSED THROUGH HIS HEAD AS HE LABORED THAT SHE WOULD HATE HIM FOR THIS, AND ON THAT, AT LEAST, THEY WOULD BE OF ONE ACCORD. BUT THE THOUGHT WAS SOON LOST TO SENSATION.
THEN TEARS CAME, THOUGH THESE TOO HE FELT UTTERLY DETACHED FROM. FINALLY, THE BOUT DISPATCHED, HE WENT THROUGH INTO THE KIT-CHEN, FOUND A CUP, AND DRANK HIMSELF SENSELESS.
BASTARD.
THE POISON PASSED, HE ROLLED OFF HER.

GARVEY'S STUDY WAS AN IMPRESSIVE ROOM; HE'D HAD IT FASHIONED AFTER THAT OF A TAX LAWYER HE'D KNOWN. WHEN HE FOUND SLEEP DIFFICULT, AS HE DID NOW, HE WOULD RETIRE TO THE STUDY, SIT ON HIS LEATHER-BACKED CHAIR BEHIND A VAST DESK, AND DREAM OF LEGITIMACY. NOT TONIGHT, HOWEVER; TONIGHT HIS THOUGHTS WERE OTHERWISE PREOCCUPIED. ALWAYS, HOWEVER MUCH HE MIGHT TRY TO TURN TO ANOTHER ROUTE, THEY WENT BACK TO LEOPOLD ROAD.

HE REMEMBERED LITTLE OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED AT THE POOLS. THAT IN ITSELF WAS DISTRESSING; HE HAD ALWAYS PRIDED HIMSELF UPON THE ACUTENESS OF HIS MEMORY. INDEED, HIS RECALL OF FACES SEEN AND FAVORS DONE HAD IN NO SMALL MEASURE HELPED HIM TO HIS PRESENT POWER.

BUT OF THE EVENTS AT LEOPOLD ROAD, BARELY THIRTY-SIX HOURS OLD, HE HAD ONLY THE VAGUEST RECOLLECTION: OF THE WOMEN CLOSING UPON HIM, AND THE ROPE TIGHTENING AROUND HIS NECK; OF THEIR LEADING HIM ALONG THE LIP OF THE POOL TO SOME CHAMBER, THE VILENESS OF WHICH HAD PRACTICALLY SNATCHED HIS SENSES AWAY.

WHAT HAD FOLLOWED HIS ARRIVAL THERE MOVED IN HIS MEMORY LIKE THOSE FORMS IN THE FILTH OF THE POOL: OBSCURE, BUT HORRIBLY DISTRESSING. THERE HAD BEEN HUMILIATION AND HORRORS, HADN'T THERE? BEYOND THAT, HE REMEMBERED NOTHING.

HE WAS NOT A MAN TO KOWTOW TO SUCH AMBIGUITIES WITHOUT ARGUMENT, HOWEVER. IF THERE WERE MYSTERIES TO BE UNCOVERED HERE, THEN HE WOULD DO SO, AND TAKE THE CONSEQUENCE OF REVELATION. HIS FIRST OFFENSIVE HAD BEEN SENDING CHANDAMAN AND FRYER TO TEAR UP COLOQHOUN'S PLACE. IF, AS HE SUSPECTED, THIS WHOLE ENTERPRISE WAS SOME ELABORATE TRAP DEVISED BY HIS ENEMIES, THEN COLOQHOUN WAS INVOLVED IN ITS SETTING.

CHANDAMAN HAD RETURNED WITH THE GROUND PLAN OF THE POOLS, AND GARVEY HAD TRACED HIS ROUTE THROUGH THE COMPLEX TIME AND AGAIN, HOPING THAT HIS MEMORY MIGHT BE JOGGED. HE HAD BEEN DISAPPOINTED.

THE GARDEN BEHIND THE HOUSE WAS VAST AND PAINSTAKINGLY TENDED. HE COULD SEE LITTLE OF THE IMMACULATE BORDERS AT THE MOMENT, HOWEVER; THE STARLIGHT BARELY DESCRIBED THE WORLD OUTSIDE. ALL HE COULD SEE WAS HIS OWN REFLECTION IN THE POLISHED PANE.

AS HE FOCUSED ON IT, HIS OUTLINE SEEMED TO WAVER, AND HE FELT A LOOSENING IN HIS LOWER BELLY, AS IF SOMETHING HAD COME UNKNOTTED THERE. HE PUT HIS HAND TO HIS ABDOMEN. IT TWITCHED, IT TREMBLED, AND FOR AN INSTANT HE WAS BACK IN THE POOLS, AND NAKED, AND SOMETHING LUMPEN MOVED IN FRONT OF HIS EYES.

HE ALMOST YELLED, BUT STOPPED HIMSELF BY TURNING AWAY FROM THE WINDOW AND STARING AT THE ROOM; AT THE CARPETS AND THE BOOKS AND THE FURNITURE; AT SOBER, SOLID REALITY. EVEN THEN THE IMAGE REFUSED TO LEAVE HIS HEAD ENTIRELY. THE COILS OF HIS INNARDS WERE STILL JITTERY.

IT WAS SEVERAL MINUTES BEFORE HE COULD BRING HIMSELF TO LOOK BACK AT THE REFLECTION IN THE WINDOW. WHEN AT LAST HE DID, ALL TRACE OF THE VACILLATION HAD DISAPPEARED. HE WOULD COUNTENANCE NO MORE NIGHTS LIKE THIS, SLEEPLESS AND HAUNTED. WITH THE FIRST LIGHT OF DAWN CAME THE CONVICTION THAT TODAY WAS THE DAY TO BREAK MR. COLOQHOUN.

JERRY TRIED TO CALL CAROLE AT HER OFFICE THAT MORNING. SHE WAS REPEATEDLY UNAVAILABLE. EVENTUALLY HE SIMPLY GAVE UP TRYING AND TURNED HIS ATTENTIONS TO THE HERCULEAN TASK OF RESTORING SOME ORDER TO THE FLAT.

AFTER A FUTILE HOUR, IN WHICH HE SEEMED NOT TO HAVE MADE MORE THAN A DENT, HE GAVE UP. THE CHAOS ACCURATELY REFLECTED HIS OPINION OF HIMSELF. BEST PERHAPS THAT IT BE LEFT TO LIE.

MR. COLOQHOUN? MR. GERALD COLOQ-HOUN?
THAT'S RIGHT.
MY NAME'S FRYER. I'M CALLING ON BEHALF OF MR. GARVEY. HE WAS EXPECTING SOME PROPOSALS FROM YOU.
WAS THIS TO GLOAT, OR THREATEN FURTHER MISCHIEF?

MR. GARVEY WOULD LIKE ANOTHER MEETING AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.
YES?
AT THE POOLS, THERE'RE A FEW ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS HE'D LIKE TO SHOW HIS COLLEAGUES. WOULD YOU BE AVAILABLE LATER ON TODAY?
YES. OF COURSE.
FOUR-THIRTY?

THE CONVERSATION MORE OR LESS ENDED THERE, LEAVING JERRY MYSTIFIED. THERE HAD BEEN NO TRACE OF ENMITY IN FRYER'S MANNER: NO HINT, HOWEVER SUBTLE, OF BAD BLOOD BETWEEN THE TWO PARTIES. PERHAPS THE EVENTS OF THE PREVIOUS NIGHT HAD BEEN THE WORK OF ANONYMOUS VANDALS -- THE THEFT OF THE GROUND PLAN A WHIM OF THEIRS. HIS DEPRESSED SPIRITS ROSE. ALL WAS NOT LOST.

HE RANG CAROLE AGAIN, BUOYED UP BY THIS TURN OF EVENTS. THIS TIME HE DID NOT TAKE THE REPEATED EXCUSES OF HER COLLEAGUES BUT INSISTED ON SPEAKING TO HER. FINALLY, SHE PICKED UP THE PHONE.

I WANT YOU TO UNDERSTAND HOW SICK I FEEL. LET ME MAKE IT RIGHT. PLEASE LET ME MAKE IT RIGHT.
DON'T PUT THE PHONE DOWN. PLEASE DON'T. I KNOW IT WAS UNFORGIVABLE. JESUS, I KNOW...

HE SET OUT FOR HIS MEETING AT LEOPOLD ROAD WITH A FULL THREE-QUARTERS OF AN HOUR TO SPARE, BUT HALFWAY TO HIS DESTINATION THE RAIN CAME ON. GREAT SPOTS OF IT WHICH DEFIED THE BEST EFFORTS OF HIS WINDSHIELD WIPERS. THE TRAFFIC SLOWED: HE CRAWLED FOR HALF A MILE, WITH ONLY THE REAR LIGHTS OF THE VEHICLE AHEAD VISIBLE THROUGH THE DELUGE. BY THE TIME HE EDGED HIS WAY OUT OF THE FOULED-UP TRAFFIC TO FIND ANOTHER ROUTE, HE WAS ALREADY LATE.
ABOUT TIME.
THE RAIN...
YOU'LL CATCH YOUR DEATH.
FRYER! PLEASED TO MEET YOU.
THEY SHOOK HANDS, AND AS THEY DID SO JERRY CAUGHT SIGHT OF GARVEY, WHO WAS STARING AT HIM AS THOUGH IN SEARCH OF A SECOND HEAD. THE MAN DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE HALF A MINUTE, BUT SIMPLY STUDIED THE GROWING DISCOMFORT OF JERRY'S FACE.
I'M NOT A STUPID MAN.
THE STATEMENT, COMING OUT OF NOWHERE, BEGGED RESPONSE.
I DON'T EVEN BELIEVE YOU'RE THE MAIN MAN IN ALL OF THIS. I'M PREPARED TO BE CHARITABLE.
WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?
I DIDN'T TELL YOU TO GO.
FOR MYSELF. THE DEAL I OFFERED—
FORGET YOUR FUCKING DEAL. I'M NOT INTERESTED IN DEALS.
I SEE. THEN I DON'T SEE ANY POINT IN THIS CONVERSATION.
CHARITABLE, BECAUSE I THINK YOU'RE OUT OF YOUR DEPTH, ISN'T THAT RIGHT?
I HAVEN'T A CLUE WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT.
JERRY SHRUGGED LIGHTLY. EACH WORD GARVEY UTTERED MERELY PERPLEXED HIM MORE; BUT THE MAN HAD ALREADY TOLD HIM IGNORANCE WOULD NOT BE CONSIDERED A LEGITIMATE EXCUSE. PERHAPS A QUESTION WAS THE WISEST REPLY.
YOU SAW WOMEN HERE?
WHORES, MORE LIKE. WHO ARE YOU WORKING FOR, COLOQHOUN?
THIS PLACE. I'M TALKING ABOUT THIS PLACE. THE WOMEN YOU PUT IN HERE... FOR MY BENEFIT. WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, COLOQHOUN? THAT'S ALL I WANT TO KNOW. WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

I DON'T MUCH LIKE YOUR SORT, SMART BRATS WITH AN EYE TO THE MAIN CHANCE. THINK YOU'RE SO DAMN CLEVER, JUST BECAUSE YOU'VE GOT A FANCY ACCENT AND A SILK TIE.
LET ME TELL YOU SOMETHING. I DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT YOU. I JUST WANT TO KNOW WHO YOU WORK FOR. UNDERSTAND?
I ALREADY TOLD YOU--
WHO-- DO--YOU-- WORK-- FOR?!
FOR CHRIST'S SAKE-- I'M NOT WORKING FOR ANYBODY. AND I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ANY WOMEN.
NAME SOME NAMES.
OR WE'RE GOING TO BREAK YOUR LEGS.
CHECK MY CREDENTIALS, YOU'VE GOT THE RESOURCES. DIG AROUND.
I'M NOT A COMPANY MAN, GARVEY. I NEVER HAVE BEEN.
GARVEY'S EYE LEFT JERRY'S FACE FOR A MOMENT AND MOVED TO HIS SHOULDER. JERRY GRASPED THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SIGN A HEARTBEAT TOO LATE...
OOF!
WHO DO YOU WORK FOR?
NAMES!
STAND UP WHEN HE'S TALKING TO YOU!
JESUS... JESUS...
NOW HENRY SMELLED THAT ACIDIC SCENT CAROLE HAD CAUGHT ON THE STAIRS: IT WAS FRYER'S COLOGNE.

STAND UP!
GOD DAMN!
FIND THAT FLASHLIGHT! HURRY!
THERE WAS EVIDENTLY NO SAFE ROUTE PAST HIS TORMENTORS TO THE FRONT DOOR; HIS ONLY HOPE LAY IN LOSING HIMSELF IN THE NETWORKS OF CORRIDORS THAT LAY AHEAD.
FOUND IT! HE WENT THIS WAY-- HE MUST HAVE!
WHUMP
IF, AS CAROLE HAD SAID, THE PLACE WAS A SIMPLE SPIRAL, THE CORRIDORS DESCRIBING A RELENTLESS LOOP WITH NO WAY OUT OF THE CONFIGURATION, HE WAS LOST. BUT HE WAS COMMITTED. HEAD GIDDIED BY THE MOUNTING HEAT, HE MOVED ON, PRAYING TO FIND A FIRE EXIT THAT WOULD GIVE HIM PASSAGE OUT OF THIS TRAP.
SHALL WE GO AFTER HIM?
NO.
NOTHING, NOT EVEN THE PROMISE OF KNIGHTHOOD, WOULD HAVE INDUCED HIM TO FOLLOW.
IT'S WARM...
GARVEY KNEW ALL TOO WELL HOW WARM IT WAS. SUCH HEAT WASN'T NATURAL, NOT FOR ENGLAND. THIS WAS A TEMPERATE ISLE; THAT WAS WHY HE HAD NEVER SET FOOT OFF IT. THE SWELTERING HEAT OF OTHER CONTINENTS BRED GROTESQUERIES HE WANTED NO SIGHT OF.
SO WE JUST WAIT FOR HIM TO COME OUT?!
YOU TWO CAN WAIT FOR HIM AT HIS FLAT. HE'LL HAVE TO COME HOME SOONER OR LATER.

PERHAPS THEY WEREN'T FOLLOWING. IT WAS SEVERAL MINUTES NOW SINCE JERRY HAD HEARD THE VOICES BEHIND HIM.
HE CLOSED HIS EYES AND MADE A STUDIED ATTEMPT TO MESMERIZE HIMSELF OUT OF HIS PAIN. WHAT WAS FEELING BUT A TRICK OF THE NERVE-ENDINGS?
BUT NO SOONER HAD HIS LIDS CLOSED THAN HE HEARD MUTED SOUNDS SOMEWHERE NEARBY: FOOTSTEPS; THE LULL OF VOICES. FEMALE VOICES.
EITHER HE HAD BECOME USED TO THE DARKNESS IN HIS FEW MOMENTS OF MEDITATION OR ELSE A LIGHT HAD CREPT INTO THE PASSAGEWAY; IT WAS SURELY THE LATTER.
THE HEAT SEEMED TO HAVE RISEN CONSIDERABLY IN THE LAST FEW MINUTES: IT GAVE HIM MILD HALLUCINATIONS.
YAAAA!
IF GARVEY HAD HEARD HIS YELL, AND SENT HIS LIEUTENANTS IN PURSUIT, THEN SO BE IT...
...HE WAS PAST CARING.
THE SOUND OF MOVEMENT REACHED HIM FROM ACROSS THE CHAMBER. A NAKED GIRL HAD APPEARED IN THE DOORWAY OPPOSITE, OR SO HIS REELING SENSES INFORMED HIM.
THE GIRL HAD BEGUN TO LAUGH AT HIM, A LIGHT EASY LAUGH THAT MADE HIM FEEL FOOLISH. ITS MUSICALITY ENTRANCED HIM. THESE WERE THE WOMEN GARVEY HAD BABBLED ABOUT; THIS THE TRAP HE HAD ACCUSED JERRY OF SETTING.
HA HEE HEE
WHO ARE YOU?

THE WOMAN HAD NOT ANSWERED HIS INQUIRY, NOR DID SHE MAKE ANY ATTEMPT TO HELP HIM. LOOKING UP AT HER, JERRY FELT HIS TENUOUS GRIP ON CONSCIOUSNESS SLIPPING. THE HEAT, HIS PAIN, AND NOW THIS SUDDEN ERUPTION OF BEAUTY WAS TOO MUCH FOR HIM.

THE DISTANT WOMEN WERE DISPERSING INTO DARKNESS, THE ENTIRE CHAMBER FOLDING UP LIKE A MAGICIAN'S BOX UNTIL THE SUBLIME CREATURE IN FRONT OF HIM CLAIMED HIS ATTENTION UTTERLY.

AND NOW, AT HER SILENT INSISTENCE, HIS MIND'S EYE SEEMED TO BE PLUCKED FROM HIS HEAD, AND SUDDENLY HE WAS SPEEDING OVER HER SKIN, HER FLESH A LANDSCAPE, EACH PORE A PIT, EACH HAIR A PYLON.

HE WAS HERS, UTTERLY. SHE DROWNED HIM IN HER EYES, AND FLAYED HIM WITH HER LASHES; SHE ROLLED HIM ACROSS HER ABDOMEN, AND DOWN THE SOFT CHANNEL OF HER SPINE.

SHE TOOK HIM BETWEEN HER BUTTOCKS AND THEN UP INTO HER HEAT, AND OUT AGAIN JUST AS HE THOUGHT HE MUST BURN ALIVE.

THE VELOCITY EXHILARATED HIM. HE WAS AWARE THAT HIS BODY, SOMEWHERE BELOW, WAS HYPERVENTILATING IN ITS TERROR, BUT HIS IMAGINATION -- CARELESS OF BREATH -- WENT WILLINGLY WHERE SHE SENT HIM, LOOPING LIKE A BIRD, UNTIL HE WAS THROWN, RAGGED AND DIZZY, BACK INTO THE CUP OF HIS SKULL. BEFORE HE COULD APPLY THE FRAGILE TOOL OF REASON TO THE PHENOMENA HE HAD JUST EXPERIENCED, HIS EYES FLUTTERED CLOSED AND HE PASSED OUT.

THE BODY DOES NOT NEED THE MIND. IT HAS PROCEDURES APLENTY -- LUNGS TO BE FILLED AND EMPTIED, BLOOD TO BE PUMPED AND FOOD PROFITED FROM -- NONE OF WHICH REQUIRE THE AUTHORITY OF THOUGHT. ONLY WHEN ONE OR MORE OF THESE PROCEDURES FALTERS DOES THE MIND BECOME AWARE OF THE INTRICACY OF THE MECHANISM IT INHABITS.

GOLDGHOUN'S PAINT LASTED ONLY A FEW MINUTES, BUT WHEN HE CAME TO HE WAS AWARE OF HIS BODY AS HE HAD SELDOM BEEN BEFORE: AS A TRAP. ITS FRAGILITY WAS A TRAP; ITS SHAPE, ITS SIZE, ITS VERY GENDER WAS A TRAP. AND THERE WAS NO FLYING OUT OF IT; HE WAS SHACKLED TO, OR IN, THIS WRETCHEDNESS.

THEY MEAN TO DROWN ME!
NO! I'M ALREADY DROWNING!
HUSH...
THERE WAS MOVEMENT BEHIND THE CASCADING VEIL OF WATER: A SHAPE TOO VAST TO BE HUMAN. WAS IT AN ANIMAL? THERE WAS A PUNGENT SMELL IN HERE THAT HAD SOMETHING OF THE MENAGERIE ABOUT IT.
HE SENSED THAT HE WAS SENSED! THAT THE DARK, RECUMBENT CREATURE HAD TURNED ITS EYES IN HIS DIRECTION. BENEATH ITS GAZE, HE FELT HIS SKIN CREEP WITH GOOSEFLESH, BUT HE COULDN'T TAKE HIS EYES OFF IT.
NO, NOT IT: SHE. HE KNEW INDISPUTABLY THAT THIS CREATURE WAS FEMALE, THOUGH IT RESEMBLED NO SPECIES OR GENUS HE KNEW OF.
WATCHING HER, JERRY THOUGHT OF SOMETHING SLOW AND MOLTEN — GLASS PERHAPS, OR STONE — ITS FLESH EXTRUDED INTO ELABORATE FORMS AND RECALLED AGAIN INTO THE FURNACE TO BE REMADE.

NOW THE BODY ISSUED A SERIES OF SOFT NOISES: SCUTTLINGS AND SIGHS. HE WONDERED IF HE WAS BEING ADDRESSED, AND, IF SO, HOW HE WAS EXPECTED TO RESPOND.
DON'T BE AFRAID.
I'M NOT.
WHAT IS SHE?
SHE IS THE MADONNA, THE VIRGIN MOTHER.
MOTHER?
THE WAVES OF PHOSPHORESCENCE HAD CEASED TO BREAK ACROSS HER BODY. NOW THE LIGHT PULSED IN ONE PART OF HER ANATOMY ONLY, AND AT THIS REGION, IN RHYTHM WITH THE PULSE, THE MADONNA'S SUBSTANCE WAS SWELLING AND SPLITTING.
THE MADONNA WAS GIVING BIRTH.
NOT HUMAN...
ARE ALL... ALL THE CHILDREN LIKE THAT?
NO ONE IS LIKE ANOTHER. WE FEED THEM. SOME DIE, OTHERS LIVE, AND GO THEIR WAYS.
AND THE FATHER?
BUT WHEN JERRY LOOKED BACK FOR THE MOTHER AND CHILD, THEY HAD GONE. INDEED, ALL THE WOMEN HAD GONE BUT ONE. SHE SAT ACROSS THE ROOM, HER LEGS SPLAYED. HE GAZED AT THE PLACE BETWEEN THEM, AND THEN BACK AT HER FACE.
AFTER THEY HAD MADE LOVE, HE AND THE SMILING GIRL, WHEN HE TRIED TO RECALL THE SPECIFICS OF THE ACT, HE COULD NOT BE CERTAIN THAT HE HAD PERFORMED AT ALL. ONLY THE VAGUEST MEMORIES REMAINED TO HIM, AND THEY WERE NOT OF HER KISSES, OR OF HOW THEY COUPLED...
WHERE, FOR GOD'S SAKE?
TO THE WATER. TO THE SEA. INTO DREAMS.
SHE NEEDS NO HUSBAND. SHE COULD MAKE CHILDREN FROM A SHOWER OF RAIN IF SHE SO DESIRED...
WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?
I'M NOT AFRAID.
THEN WHY DON'T YOU COME TO ME?
NEVER... NEVER...
WHSSHT

NOW, ALL TOO LATE, EZRA GARVEY KNEW THAT RETURNING TO THE POOLS (EVEN FOR AN ACT OF INTIMIDATION, WHICH HE HAD TRADITIONALLY ENJOYED) HAD BEEN AN ERROR. IT HAD REOPENED A WOUND IN HIM THAT HE HAD HOPED WAS NEAR TO HEALING; AND IT HAD BROUGHT MEMORIES OF HIS SECOND VISIT THERE CLOSER TO THE SURFACE (MEMORIES WHICH HE HAD SOUGHT TO CLARIFY UNTIL HE BEGAN TO GRASP THEIR TRUE NATURE).

THEY HAD DRUGGED HIM SOMEHOW, HADN'T THEY? AND WHEN HE WAS WEAK AND HAD LOST ALL SENSE OF PROPRIETY, THEY HAD BUCKLED HIM LIKE A CHILD AND MADE HIM THEIR PLAYTHING. THE MEMORIES OF THAT MERELY PERPLEXED HIM; BUT THERE WERE OTHERS, TOO DEEP TO BE DISTINGUISHED QUITE, THAT APPALLED. OF WATER FALLING IN A CURTAIN; OF A DARKNESS THAT WAS TERRIBLE, AND A LUMINESCENCE THAT WAS MORE TERRIBLE STILL.

THE TIME HAD COME, HE KNEW, TO TRAMPLE THESE DREAMS UNDERFOOT AND BE DONE WITH SUCH BAFFLEMENT. HE WAS A MAN WHO FORGOT NEITHER FAVORS DONE NOR FAVORS OWED. A LITTLE BEFORE ELEVEN, HE CALLED SOME OF THOSE FAVORS IN. WHATEVER LIVED AT LEOPOLD ROAD POOLS WOULD PROSPER THERE NO LONGER. SATISFIED WITH HIS NIGHT'S MANEUVERS, HE WENT UPSTAIRS TO BED.

WHEN HE NEXT WOKE, IT WAS 1:30 A.M. HE HAD SELDOM BEEN ILL IN HIS FORTY-ODD YEARS; SUCCESS HAD KEPT AILMENTS AT BAY. BUT NOW HE FELT TERRIBLE. HIS BELLY WAS CAVORTING AGAIN; INDEED, HIS WHOLE BODY FELT TRAUMATIZED. HE HAD A HEADACHE WHICH WAS NEAR TO BLINDING—HE STUMBLED FROM HIS BEDROOM DOWN TO THE KITCHEN MORE BY AID OF TOUCH THAN SIGHT. THERE HE POURED HIMSELF A GLASS OF MILK...

...SAT DOWN AT THE TABLE, AND PUT IT TO HIS LIPS. HE DID NOT DRINK, HOWEVER. HIS GAZE HAD ALIGHTED ON THE HAND THAT HELD HIS GLASS. HE STARED AT IT THROUGH A FOG OF PAIN. IT DIDN'T SEEM TO BE HIS HAND.

HE NEEDED TO BE WITH SOMEBODY; ANYBODY WOULD DO. HE PICKED UP HIS TELEPHONE BOOK AND TRIED TO MAKE SENSE OF THE SCRAWLINGS ON EACH PAGE, BUT THE NUMBERS WOULD NOT COME CLEAR.

WAS THIS INSANITY? THE DELUSION OF HIS TRANSFORMED HAND, THE UNNATURAL SENSATIONS THAT WERE RUNNING THROUGH HIS BODY.

HE REACHED TO UNBUTTON HIS SHIRT, AND IN DOING SO HIS HAND BRUSHED ANOTHER DELUSION, MORE ABSURD THAN THE FIRST. FINGERS UNWILLING, HE TORE AT THE SHIRT, TELLING HIMSELF OVER AND OVER THAT NONE OF THIS WAS POSSIBLE.

BUT THE EVIDENCE WAS PLAIN. THERE WERE STILL SIGNS THAT THE FLESH AND BONE BELONGED TO HIM—AN APPENDIX SCAR ON HIS LOWER ABDOMEN, A BIRTHMARK BENEATH HIS ARM—BUT THE SUBSTANCE OF HIS BODY HAD BEEN TEASED (WAS BEING TEASED STILL, EVEN AS HE WATCHED) INTO SHAPES THAT SHAMED HIM. HE CLAWED AT THE FORMS THAT DISFIGURED HIS TORSO, AS IF THEY MIGHT DISSOLVE BENEATH HIS ASSAULT, BUT THEY MERELY BLED.

UNABLE TO HOLD BACK THE TEARS, HE BEGAN TO PULL AT THE BELT OF HIS TROUSERS. PLEASE, GOD, HE BABBLED, PLEASE, GOD, LET ME BE WHOLE STILL. HE PEERED AT HIS GROIN.

SEEING WHAT DEFORMITIES WERE IN PROGRESS THERE, HE ROARED UNTIL THE WINDOWS RATTLED.

GARVEY WAS NOT A MAN FOR PREVARICATION. DEEDS, HE KNEW, WERE NOT BEST SERVED BY DEBATE. HE WASN'T SURE HOW THIS TREATISE ON TRANSFORMATION HAD BEEN WRITTEN INTO HIS SYSTEM, AND HE DIDN'T MUCH CARE. ALL HE COULD THINK OF WAS HOW MANY DEATHS OF SHAME HE WOULD DIE IF THIS VILE CONDITION EVER SAW THE LIGHT OF DAY.
ONLY AT THE WATER'S EDGE, HAVING COME SO FAR WITHOUT EXAMINING HIS INTENTIONS TOO CLOSELY, DID FEAR OF EXTINCTION GIVE HIM PAUSE. HE WAS A WEALTHY AND INFLUENTIAL MAN! WERE THERE NOT OTHER ROUTES OUT OF THIS ORDEAL OTHER THAN THE ONE HE HAD COME HEADLONG TO? PILL PEDDLERS WHO COULD REVERSE THE LUNACY THAT HAD SEIZED HIS CELLS? SURGEONS WHO MIGHT SLICE OFF THE OFFENDING PARTS AND KNIT HIS LOST SELF BACK TOGETHER AGAIN?
BUT HOW LONG WOULD SUCH SOLUTIONS LAST? SOONER OR LATER, THE PROCESS WOULD BEGIN AGAIN! HE KNEW IT. HE WAS BEYOND HELP.
AT LAST HE REMEMBERED THE THING THAT LIVED BEHIND THE WATER WALL. A CREATURE THAT WAS WORSE THAN ANY NIGHTMARE OF WOMANHOOD HIS GRIEVING MIND HAD DREDGED UP. HE HAD FUCKED THERE IN THE PRESENCE OF THAT BEHEMOTH, AND IN THE FURY OF THE ACT -- WHEN HE HAD MOMENTARILY FORGOTTEN HIMSELF -- THE BITCHES HAD WORKED THIS RAPTURE UPON HIM.
NO USE FOR REGRETS, WHAT WAS DONE, WAS DONE. AT LEAST HE HAD MADE PROVISION FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF THEIR LAIR, NOW HE WOULD UNDO BY SELF-SURGERY WHAT THEY HAD CONTRIVED BY MAGIC, AND SO AT LAST DENY THEM SIGHT OF THEIR HANDIWORK.
THE WIND WAS COLD, BUT HIS BLOOD WAS HOT. IT CAME GUSHINGLY AS HE SLASHED AT HIS BODY.
THE THAMES RECEIVED THE LIBATION WITH ENTHUSIASM. IT LAPPED AT HIS FEET; IT WHIPPED ITSELF INTO EDDIES.
THE PRAYER HE OFFERED UP AS THE RIVER CLOSED OVER HIM WAS THAT DEATH NOT BE A WOMAN.

LONG BEFORE GARVEY HAD AWAKENED IN THE NIGHT AND DISCOVERED HIS BODY IN REBELLION, JERRY HAD LEFT THE POOLS, GOT INTO HIS CAR, AND ATTEMPTED TO DRIVE HOME. HE HAD NOT BEEN THE EQUAL OF THAT SIMPLE TASK, HOWEVER. HIS EYES WERE BLEARY, HIS SENSE OF DIRECTION CONFUSED.
HIS MEMORIES OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HIM AT THE POOLS WERE BY NO MEANS CLEAR, THOUGH THE EVENTS WERE MERE HOURS OLD. HIS HEAD WAS FULL OF STRANGE ASSOCIATIONS. HE WALKED IN THE SOLID WORLD, BUT HALF DREAMING.
IT WAS THE SIGHT OF CHANDAMAN AND FRYER WAITING FOR HIM AT HIS FLAT THAT SLAPPED HIM BACK INTO REALITY. HE DID NOT WAIT FOR THEM TO GREET HIM, BUT TURNED AND RAN.
WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
TO SEE THE YACHTS.
WHICH YACHTS ARE THOSE?
WHAT SEA IS THIS?
DOES IT MATTER WHAT SEA? AREN'T ALL SEAS ONE SEA, FINALLY?
JERRY?
WHAT THE HELL'S HAPPENED TO YOU?
I COULD HAVE DROWNED.

HE TOLD HER ABOUT THE TRAP GARVEY HAD SET AT LEOPOLD ROAD, AND OF THE THUGS' PRESENCE AT HIS OWN HOUSE. SHE OFFERED COOL SYMPATHY. HE SAID NOTHING ABOUT WHAT HE'D SEEN IN THE SHOWER ROOM. HE COULDN'T HAVE ARTICULATED IT EVEN IF HE'D WANTED TO: EVERY HOUR THAT PASSED SINCE HE'D LEFT THE POOLS HE WAS LESS CERTAIN OF HAVING SEEN ANYTHING AT ALL.

DO YOU WANT TO STAY HERE?

I THOUGHT YOU'D NEVER ASK.

YOU'D BETTER HAVE A BATH. ARE YOU SURE THEY DIDN'T BREAK ANY BONES?

I THINK I'D FEEL IT BY NOW IF THEY HAD.

NO BROKEN BONES, PERHAPS, BUT HE HAD NOT ESCAPED UNMARKED. WHEN HE GOT OUT OF THE BATH AND SURVEYED HIMSELF IN THE MIRROR, HIS BODY SEEMED TO BE PUFFED UP BY THE BEATING, THE SKIN OF HIS CHEST TENDER AND TIGHT. HE WAS NOT A PRETTY SIGHT.

I'D LIKE TO LOVE YOU. WHY DO YOU MAKE IT SO DIFFICULT?

DO I?

SHE WANTED TO SLIDE HER HAND BENEATH THE BATHROBE HE WAS STILL WEARING -- SHE HAD NEVER QUITE UNDERSTOOD HIS COYNESS, BUT IT CHARMED HER -- AND CARESS HIM. BUT THERE WAS A CERTAIN INSULARITY IN THE WAY HE LAY THAT SIGNALED HIS WISH TO BE LEFT UNTOUCHED, AND SHE RESPECTED IT.

THE TIDE WAS NOT KIND TO EZRA GARVEY. BY EIGHT O'CLOCK, HE HAD GAINED MORE THAN MORNING AS AN AUDIENCE.

JERRY WOKE TO THE SOUND OF THE SHOWER RUNNING IN THE ADJACENT BATHROOM. HE HAD A DIFFICULT DAY AHEAD, IN WHICH HE WOULD HAVE TO MAKE SOME ACCOUNT OF RECENT EVENTS TO THE POLICE. THE SOONER HE GOT UP AND THOUGHT HIS STORY THROUGH, THE MORE WATERTIGHT IT WOULD BE.

HE TRIED TO SHAKE HIMSELF AWAKE, BUT THERE WAS NOWHERE TO WAKE TO. THIS TRANSFORMED ANATOMY WAS HIS -- ITS SLIT, ITS SMOOTHNESS, ITS STRANGE WEIGHT -- ALL HIS. IN THE HOURS SINCE MIDNIGHT, HE HAD BEEN UNKITTED AND REMADE IN ANOTHER IMAGE.

FROM NEXT DOOR THE SOUND OF THE SHOWER BROUGHT THE MADONNA BACK INTO HIS HEAD. BROUGHT THE WOMAN, TOO, WHO HAD COAXED HIM INTO HER AND WHISPERED, AS HE FROWNED AND THRUST, "NEVER... NEVER..." TELLING HIM, THOUGH HE COULDN'T KNOW IT, THAT THIS COUPLING WAS HIS LAST AS A MAN.

PERHAPS THERE WERE MORE ENCHANTMENTS WHERE THIS HAD COME FROM, IF SO, HE WOULD GO BACK TO THE POOLS AND FIND THEM FOR HIMSELF: FOLLOW THE SPIRAL INTO ITS HOT HEART AND DEBATE MYSTERIES WITH THE MADONNA.

I SAW...

AM I GOING MAD?

NO.

THEN WHAT'S HAPPENING?

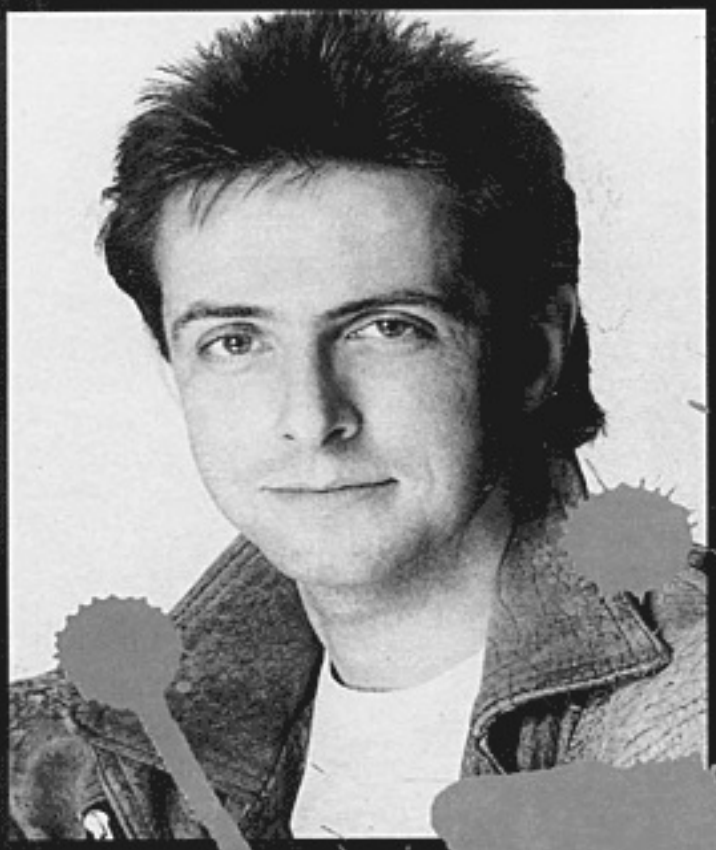
I DON'T KNOW. IS IT SO TERRIBLE?

VILE. REVOLTING. I DON'T WANT TO LOOK AT YOU. YOU HEAR ME? I DON'T WANT TO SEE!

HE DIDN'T ATTEMPT TO ARGUE. SHE DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW HIM AND THAT WAS HER PREROGATIVE.

WHEN HE ARRIVED AT LEOPOLD ROAD, THERE WERE SEVERAL MEN ON THE STEPS. THEY WERE TALKING, THOUGH HE DIDN'T KNOW IT, OF IMMINENT DEMOLITION.

HE HAD NOT BROUGHT A FLASHLIGHT, BUT WHEN HE PLUNGED INTO THE LABYRINTH HE TRUSTED TO HIS INSTINCT, AND IT DID NOT FORSAKE HIM.
HE HURRIED THROUGH CHAMBER AFTER CHAMBER, HIS HOPES SINKING. THE WATER STILL BRIMMED IN THE POOL, BUT ALMOST ALL ITS LIGHT HAD FLICKERED OUT. HE STUDIED THE BROTH: THERE WAS NO MOVEMENT IN THE DEPTHS. THEY HAD GONE. THE MOTHERS; THE CHILDREN, AND, NO DOUBT, THE FIRST CAUSE, THE MADONNA.
THE WITCHES HAD GONE, AND HE, THEIR CREATURE, WAS LEFT TO FEND FOR HIMSELF, DEPRIVED OF THEIR MYSTERIES.
HE WANDERED ALONG THE EDGE OF THE POOL DESPAIRING. THE SURFACE OF THE WATER WAS NOT QUITE CALM: A CIRCLE OF RIPPLES HAD AWAKENED IN IT AND WAS GROWING BY THE HEARTBEAT.
SOME TRAP HAD BEEN OPENED IN THE BOTTOM OF THE POOL, AND THE WATERS WERE DRAINING AWAY. WAS THIS WHERE THE MADONNA HAD FLED? TO THE SEWERS MAYBE, AND THEN TO THE RIVER, AND FINALLY OUT TO SEA.
TO DEATH BY DROWNING; TO THE EXTINCTION OF MAGIC. OR BY SOME SECRET CHANNEL DOWN INTO THE EARTH, TO SOME SANCTUARY SAFE FROM INQUIRY WHERE RAPTURE WAS NOT FORBIDDEN.
THE VORTEX WHIRLED AND FOAMED AND SPAT. HE STUDIED THE SHAPE IT DESCRIBED, A SPIRAL, OF COURSE, ELEGANT AND INEVITABLE. THE WATERS WERE SINKING FAST NOW, VERY SOON IT WOULD ALL BE GONE, THE DOOR TO ANOTHER WORLD SEALED UP AND LOST.
HE HAD NO CHOICE.
THERE WAS LIGHT AHEAD. HOW FAR IT LAY, HE COULDN'T CALCULATE, BUT WHAT DID IT MATTER? IF HE DROWNED BEFORE HE REACHED THAT PLACE, SO WHAT? DEATH WAS NO MORE CERTAIN THAN THE DREAM OF MASCULINITY HE'D LIVED THESE YEARS. TERMS OF DESCRIPTION FIT ONLY TO BE TURNED UP AND OVER AND INSIDE OUT.
THE EARTH WAS BRIGHT, WASN'T IT, AND PROBABLY FULL OF STARS. HE OPENED HIS MOUTH AND SHOUTED INTO THE WHIRLPOOL, AS THE LIGHT GREW AND GREW, AN ANTHEM IN PRAISE OF PARADOX.
THE END



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